Making Art Ethnography:
Painting, War and Ethnographic practice

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Over the last twenty years, the development of visual anthropology has helped all anthropologists to develop a keener eye. Our use of photography, film and video as a part of the research process, and as a way to present our findings opens up anthropology to new audiences while offering new avenues for representing our work and the people we work with. While at least some attention has been given to musical performance, to theatre or to the poems of sketches of anthropologists, painting in the field has been pointedly ignored, even while path breaking work on art markets has been published.(1) Is this because of the strong association of painting with Euro-American High Culture? (2) Is it due to the fact that speaking of "the painter" calls up the image of the quintessential Romantic "artist" in many people's minds? Photography and film walk the line between art and science, playing on realist tropes in ways that have been widely critiqued yet remain pervasive. (3) An anthropologist painting walks this line in ways that might seem too out of balance to maintain this tightrope between aesthetics and reason, leading her to fall into the role of the artist once she takes up her paint brush. Here, I note what might be lost in failing to include the move from anthropology to art by considering how painting has been a key 4ypart of fieldwork practice for me, not just as a means of recording, but as a part of the interactive and conceptual process of research.

Red Threads for Field Weaving

Figure one here

In 1990, I travelled by car from Casablanca to the Northern Moroccan town of Chaouen for a weekend vacation. Along the way, my eye was attracted the bright spots of red color that punctuated the hillsides. The bright red and white skirts of women working in the fields caught my attention. Once I returned home to Casablanca, these scenes reappeared as an oil painint inspired by the journey. The triptych was joined together by the striped aprons of the women which seemed to hold together and define the land. This piece portrays the area quite precisely in how it ties the landscape to those working on it, the women on the golden hillsides to the hands of the weavers in Chaouen who manufacture their attire. The threads of the women's attire direct the viewer's gaze toward the edges of each panel. Calling on calligraphy, but employing no written words, red and white lines weave new landscapes. It is a though I imagined the women writing the land and stitching it together just as they bundle enormous loads of wood and carry them home to light their fires. Their skirts appear against fields of gold and blue, stretching from the hillsides toward the Mediterranean to show how their activity that gives this parched land shape and meaning. Their labour and displacements appear as fundamental to the creation of the land as we can perceive it; as it is worked on by women in red skirts, women whose men remain invisible. The painter's hand mimetically follows them as they etch the hills with colour. The brush extends to create relationships amongst spaces of the canvas with strands

of red; instead of covering and hiding the sway of the woman's hips, these strings are turned lose as though to act of their own volition in gathering up the terrain. Lines if colour became like threads which my mind translates to "fils" in French which leads to the phonetic creation of the "feel" as "elephant" in Arabic; patches of footprints appear where the herd had passed.

Figure 2 here

Lines resemble pieces of thread that enter at one point of the painting and exit at another. Perhaps they recall the white writing of Cy Twombly or the stitched calligraphy on cloth work of the artist Ghada Amer. (5) Yet, although I have stitched red thread into works on paper, in the Chaouen triptych I distance myself with paint from the act of weaving. I work as if sewing, but actually covered the canvas through a process of painterly miming. The painter/calligrapher that I am reconfigures the ethnographer in me as a seamstress who can then work on conceptions of the field with a more profound understanding of how place is about laboured traversing, how mimetic transpositions might open up or provoke new ways of understanding the lay of the land in ways that recognize its eminently social truths.(6) The tableau drawn out by these red connections elicits ideas of calligraphic bodies to suggest that it is perhaps only thanks to women's skirts and the toil of weavers that these Northern Moroccan landscapes exist at all. The act of painting produces a field that does not simply depict these women as involved in their milieu; it shows them as creative of this place. And it draws up this place far beyond the entanglement of the near view of the walker or drivers, toward the distant sea.

Painting as a point of conflict

When I completed the Chouen triptych in August 1990, I hung it on my living room wall. A couple of days later, I received a visit from Kamal. As I served him coffee, the new painting caught his attention. He exclaimed, "So you're painting the red blood of war. It's the blood of the Arabs in Iraq after the arrival of the Americans." With that remark the work of art and the social work effected by this painting was radically shifted. Its red and white lines were sharpened like swords, making what were conceived of as the trace of women's skirts blown by soft winds or hitched up to facilitate their labour, into an echo a not yet articulated military order. I felt the memory of making the triptych being contaminated by this forceful voice that explained that what was careful needlepoint of the brush was actually a tactic of slashed and burned and the forceful pulling together of disparate and distant lands. The tight-knit fabric of the women's' skirts was unbound by Kamal's words, and wound around the painting in ways that suggested that he act of painting was itself an act of war. Somehow, I was being held responsible for the impending war in the Gulf. As the person wielding the brush, I was somehow an instigator of conflict. Kamal had turned red from being a symbol of life and arduous work into a signal of murderous intention.

That paintings and other art works can act screens against which to project feelings or opinions is common knowledge. Yet, we rarely ponder how observing a piece of art in the presence of its maker not only gains in intensity in this regard, but leads to a very specific kind of interaction dependent on the media and style of the artist. The art is at once a point of conversation, but also an extension of the artist or her double. A photograph includes the fact o the photographer's presence on the scene, which is fundamental to its claims to realtiy and

indeed, its appeal for establishing ethnographic authority. But a painting that offers a glimpse of an otherwise invisible world, involves a different kind of visceral, bodily action than a camera. The onctuousness of the oil paint, its textured layering by the artist's hand, the immediacy of the painter's touch does more than produce a singular,or authentic object. It bears the mark of the painter's body in ways that can make the encounter of artist, spectator and painting one of perceived danger for the artist, because of the very bodily intimacy involved in this interaction. While we have all experienced the way in which being associated with particular images or nations or symbols can be uncomfortable, the nature of a painting makes the artist especially vulnerable in this situation. So, the triangulation produced by the triptych in my Casablanca home made Kamal's comments much more threatening than had we simply disagreed about the US's eventual invasion of Iraq. His aggressive association of my brush strokes with (as yet) hypothetical military action expressed a more fundamental animosity to me as a bodily being than could even the most violent difference of argumentation. In fact, he knew that dad he said "you Americans are up to war and destruction" I would have been likely to distance myself from official positions and appear as a sentient being in my own right. By attacking the painting instead of confronting me, it was my very body, born in America and spread on the canvas that he attacked. When Kamal turned my own brush strokes against me, setting the painting ablaze, I was unable to respond because no response was possible. I was silenced by his comments because it was the trace of my very hand, the line that showed the movement of my arms that appeared as a harbinger of destruction.

In retrospect, I pondered the violence of this moment and wondered whether it was the way in which the piece was a provocative fieldwork project that led to Kamal's strong reaction. For, even as he went on to elaborate about the coming War in 1990, I noticed in his response a

tone that I recognized. It was that angular edge of a voice I heard in my mind when I read my son's report card, which in spite of excellent marks, always included the phrase "peu mieux faire," *could do better*. It was the mocking voice I would come to know as I began research on topics related to women and beauty in the salons of Casablanca. This voice was generally that of an older man, a person of great seriousness, for whom recognizing the crucial importance of the moves and attire of women challenged his understanding of how place and social relations were related to his own ways of configuring his own position. In Kamal's voice I could not help but perceive this condescending tone that always asks "how does she dare?" "How dare she take up a brush?" By following women's skirts as they made up the fields I came to take what I then referred to as a "strong position" in interpreting the field as connected by women's skirts.(7) I proposed to get people to notice how making the field of women's skirts, tying the world together by red and white reiterations of their tireless work, a different arrangement of knowledge was possible. Showing the skirts as they stitch together hillsides rather than placing women in a landscape that served to contextualize them, was my provocative action.

When Kamal read the yarn as blood, was it really Iraqi lives he was mourning? Or was he reacting to the way that the work showed skirts to determine the terrain? Was he debating the act of pulling things together through art in ways that challenge how maps are made and territories imagined? Certainly other viewers of the pice sensed the effort and potential violence involved in this kind of painterly design of the landscape, as is indicated in the note of a friend whoe wrote about the painting several years later. She wrote that the red lines were like

> "a brandished sword, or like a *moussem* that is moving toward a saint. A rift traverses the centre, like a void, emptiness or a separation between two universes. It's as though on one side a storm is beginning while on the other it is pouring down, becoming a

whirlwind of colour and movement..... The horizontal movement of the brush reinforces the impression of movement, almost of a storm. Is it a storm in the mind?"

That following women across hillside might lead to a "storm in the mind" with many consequences only becomes clear if we move beyond the painting to examine the progression of my research. As I worked to follow images and people as they make up the city of Casablanca and reiterated the centrality of the Moroccan monarch, I came up against couples like modernity and tradition, urban and rural produced in opposition to one another: "a rift traverses the centre, like a void, an emptiness or a separation between two universes."

In spite of Kamal's indelible marking of the Chaouen triptych with war, when I remember making this painting its the red threads appeared as life-lines, not threats. In those lines suggest by women's work I found a material that was strong and bright and flexible enough to follow through dark and stormy places and tie together the disparate pieces of a world in motion. When previous notions of the field were dissolving among anthropologist, and media flows and emerging markets were questioning borders, one might yet notice how landscapes are made by stitching, weaving or tying things together. Far from a simply matter of recording or inciting exchanges that might become part of one's data and analysis, a piece like this one led me to envision new ways of configuring the field and working toward what would become an ethnography of linked comparison. (9)

The Red Lines of Thought

Painting thus sent me in new directions for field design before I could actually account for this transition in writing. One could say that working out he field artistically progressively led me from a topical interest in motion and a method of following, as exemplified in Picturing Casablanca, toward a much more profound questioning of the very way that field and objects of study might be imagined and strategically determined for research.(10) The gesture of the paint-soaked brush pushed my mind in new directions and in 1991 I began a study that could be seen as a crafty weaving of distant places into a single cloth. When I began to study beauty as it took shape on the canvas stretched among the linked cities of Casablanca, Paris and Cairo, I focused my attention on how women like those on northern hillsides are left behind in the quest for modernity, or more exactly, I showed how they served as backgrounds against which the modern body could measure its speedy progress. I wove the field of inquiry with threads of history, media and migration, tying Casablanca to Paris and Cairo, but the Chaouen painting showed a territory reconfigured in terms of women's skirts, showing that if a background there was, it was alive with motion. As I presented ideas about how to worked on theories of democracy and body techniques from beauty salons, I heard echoes of Kamal's scolding voice quite often from older men, or their straight-laced young students, who wanted to keep territories and politics in line with the serious matters which they feel they have the authority to control. But I also often heard the voice of my friend Daniel as he described my project to others as a study in "fils rouges"- a work of woven or tied or interconnected red threads or lines. He could not have imagined how this phrase gave me confidence and courage, for in unwittingly recalled a painting he had never seen, he seemed to agree that painting might preceded anthropological invention.

New Lines for another War

Figure 3 here

Over time, the red lines of thought resurface in unexpected ways. In 2003 when another war commenced in Iraq, I remembered the first Gulf war: the endless hours of listening to radio stations in different languages; the tension in the market and the round face of the French engineer stabbed to death in his Casablanca office. This time, I was living in Washington, at the vortex of world power. But now it was "the French" who were being attacked in the local media, One of my responses to this in-between position was to conceive a painting on two canvases. I centred the piece with the torn title of an Arabic language paper printed in London, *Sharq al Awsat, w*hich translates as "Middle East." In fact, I only tore out the word "Awsat" which simply means middle. (figure 3) I glued the two canvases with this word, then pulled them apart, cutting the clipping into unequal halves. By blurring stock phrases about the middle in French, English and Arabic, with red, white and cerulean blue, I played on the hues that often express power in Washington, but I also recalled that these colours are shared with the tongue of that other country, which was suddenly so actively reviled by freedom fry eating officials not to mention ordinary citizens who dumped French red wine into the gutter.(9)

Thus, this piece plays on "middleness" and the "Middle East" through a collage of news clippings and phrases written or painted in Arabic, English and French. There is no attempt to stylise or beautify the words as is done in traditional calligraphy. The involvement of the red

lines with landscapes of papers and writing becomes an interrogation of the map of the region- for “al-Sharq" (east), which usually goes with "Awsat" (middle) is stuck in the lower left, and the “janub al-Awsat” (middle south) is in the upper right. Other words mark locations of the “Middle Earth” and the “juste milieu”. The red lines expand to become puddles of colour- wine? Blood? or connect words denoting geographic place, but which should usually not be beside one another. This painting addresses the make-up of a region defined by its being somehow in between. It plays on claims to good measure, negotiation and balance to mock them,, suggesting that this was simply a blending of the black and wite choices proposed by none other than George W. Bush. (10) It asks if any war be represented war in terms of balance and good measure. The question is directed not only at newspapers or politicians, but anyone who would see the world according to either a Manichean mathematics or a comfortable theory of the golden mean.

The red and white colours of the "Awsat" piece like its use of more than one canvas tie it to the previous time of war. As I stepped back to take a look at this painting, the Chaouen piece came to mind. I realized how thoroughly Kamal had bloodied not just the colour of my art but the meaning of my gesture. The red slashes I drew across the face of this canvas might represent how in working with others in our research we are transformed not only in our ideas, but bodily. In spite of myself, Kamal was with me in ways that could not be explained by what I am sure would have been our shared rejection of this invasion. Just as the women from the North may have given me the force to tear the pages of the middle of the road paper, just as Daniel encouraged me to go on in retying the field, Kamal’s work on my art touched the canvas on that spring day when the red lines returned, sending me on to a new project to get beyond the in-between through new research on serial migration.(11)