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A Note on the Cover Art: Fathering "Garden"

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I want the meaning to be imbedded in the material that I'm using. I choose the material as an extension of the concept or sometimes in opposition to it, to create a contradictory and paradoxical situation of attraction/repulsion, fascination and revulsion. (Mona Hatoum, "Interview with Mona Hatoum")

How can one imbibe in paint something as complex as the civil war that is tearing apart the fabric of Algerian society? How can one read this special issue "Algeriad" with a critical terminology of tragic experience, individual identity, and the human condition? The question is one not so much of desire as of revulsion: How does one come to deliver the sense of what a person like Rachida is, who has had to endure so much pain and suffering? In presenting the case of her letter with the brush on the canvas, one must grapple with the *impossible*, for painting an image, say, *Garden*, is as elusive as trying to come to grips with the tragic reality one encounters [End Page 157] in the streets of Algiers. Further, the paradox that defines the tragedy and the painting lies hidden in the exchange and circulation between the subject and object (of the letter). Marcel Duchamp put it perceptively when he spoke of the "co-efficient in personal art." By this he meant the gap between what the artist intends and what is physically realized.

Garden was fathered out of a love for the subject of beauty that is barred and denied in the repulsive horror. The appeal also stems from my capacity to empathize with the subject telling her story late into the night to a stranger. Sensing that the tragic experience of her family is in some way exemplary, I reach for colors of value to corroborate it. All this illuminates the articulated practice responding to the difference between the objects and setting them down in a kind of *rupture*, culminating in the cartographic gaze, the head and hands, the parts that best reveal the passions of the soul.

Rachida narrates her tragic experience with courage. Reading her story forced me to face her plight in paint. What

struck me at once is the intense care for the self that is woven in the lyrics of her song-like testimony, hence my raw emotional response, which manifests itself in the monochromatic gray that is reversed when placed against the faded yellow background whereby the male figure is isolated. The red petals further enhance the force of the image, but not without contradictions: the intense pink and red gravitate with grace against the gray and yellow to make possible a certain sense of hope and rejuvenation. The image is also violently contrasting and contradictory, suggesting a fierce urgency and deep emotion.

The male figure is pouring the rose petals with the utmost care in what can be viewed as an act of nurturing, sowing, and fertilizing. However, there exists an uncertainty and indeterminacy, for the fertilizer is the fertilized itself. The act of pouring petals also alludes to death, the act of honoring and/or mourning a burial site. In this sense, the male figure appears exhausted, carefully observing his balance, meditatively navigating the flowers. There is a hint of romantic sensibility, but there is also a conscious laboring to avoid sentimentality in order to assert that the Algerian question is not about heroism but humanism.

In confronting the male figure pouring rose petals, we first experience an artwork physically. Meanings, connotations and associations come after as we infer a consciousness. We feel that this consciousness is of the same stuff as our own and that it relates to the spread of oily marks on the canvas in the same way that our self-awareness—our sense of owning an identity with a history—relates to the body it occupies. The physical evidence—the traces of paint that represent him—is not what we identify as the subject's conscious life or spirit; rather, we feel it as a weight to which that life or spirit is inextricably bound. This weight, heaving forward into a geology centered around [End Page 158] the arch of the back, is then diffused over the breadth of the canvas, in the broadly-brushed sparse clothing. It subjects the cold, indefinite color of death underneath it—to which the consciousness held within the painted eyes seems to belong—to a determinate, clenched form. The middle-aged man is vulnerable, open to attack just as Rachida is; the rose petals on the other hand remind us of the other narrative, the one we never see or hear about, the untold story of the other victims. The painted figure offers cues for the viewer to infer chronicles of deaths suffered but untold. At the same time, this manner of painting sets up a model for our own experience; it makes some kind of general proposal to the nature of human life.

In the end, *Garden* is a voice of resistance, whispering insistently into our ears and faces while its point of origin attempts to clarify the current debate about the world we live in: a world that resembles with each passing day a wired cage where neither entry nor exit is possible. Fortunately for us, *Garden* also exemplifies a dialogue with the reader and/or viewer; a dialogue that multiplies and extends beyond borders and barriers, at times disjunctive and fragmented, at others harmonious and private.

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