

It is no longer a matter of great surprise that 21st century humanity is involved in multi-faceted religious conflict across the globe. When I was growing up this seemed so unlikely - a steady increase in secularity and scientific rationalism seemed logical, sensible, and therefore the only likely future for the world. How naïve. What a 'lucky' accident of birth to be a child of the 70s, to be 'White British', to be middle class and well educated, to be a girl, brought up vaguely 'Church of England' (code for agnostic) with no military ambitions that had not been summarily ousted by games of 'unarmed combat on the lawn' with my older brother.

I can in no way begin to explain the complex history. I have learnt that people are not rational, although they continually kid themselves to think that they are; and that their (accidental-by-birth / culturally determined / unconsciously motivated / territorial animal) decisions are based on some kind of reliable substance, which they like to call 'truth'.

Idit Elia Nathan's work, in contrast to the TV news footage we have learned to distance ourselves from, creeps up on you, and before you know it is under your skin. It doesn't accost you with scenes of desperate inequality, violence, horror or suffering. It is neatly and often colourfully engaging, and says - let's play, can you see this? She invites you to come in close, and into direct and physical engagement. When our body touches the other, we cannot so easily wipe away the sensation. As Robert Morris said in a letter to Tate curator Michael Compton in 1971 (which Nathan quotes in her blog *Play I Saw Today*) "the world begins to exist at the limits of our skin". Touch implicates and intimates more tellingly than glance.

Most of Nathan's *Hegemonopoly/Machsomopoly* board (the word *machsom*

means checkpoint in Hebrew) is copied carefully from the Israeli version of Monopoly that Nathan played as a child. There are elegiac designs lining the inner edge of the properties, which depict sunlit cityscapes with domes, hotel-lined beaches, palm trees. Nathan has superimposed images of demolished Gazan homes taken from her collection of photographs of aerial bombardment of civilian populations. The towns and districts that were represented for sale are still here, but they are now interspersed with squares representing checkpoints, settlements, the border police and airports, as well as *Command!* And *Surprise?* (the equivalent of *Chance* and *Community Chest*).

As Nathan begins to explain the colour coding for each player's pawn, something shifts uncomfortably in me. "This is real, isn't it?" "Yes" Nathan says – "it's all been carefully checked for accuracy, and checked with a human rights lawyer". All her colour codes are directly drawn from Israel's identity cards. There is only ever going to be one winner to this particular game, and they will be blue with a white stripe. I study the player instructions on the property squares. For the orange pawn it says 'go to jail and miss three turns' on most squares.

Nathan's photographs of aerial bombardments are also transformed into a *Handmade Memory Game*, one of a series of three in the exhibition. The others are made from photographs of checkpoints and of refugees respectively. Each successive player turns over two cards, until they match a pair, when they can keep the cards. The winner is the one who holds the most cards at the end of the game. It is a clever manipulation of our desire to succeed – impossible to resist trying to match the cards – not necessarily to win, but to prove something to oneself. However, in so doing one becomes implicated in and thereby trivialising, the meaning of these images.

In *Mining the Archive* Nathan pulls together curiously opposing languages. The surface of two lightboxes are roughly painted with thin black paint, leaving visible brushmarks and drips. In combination with areas of clear glass that have obviously been scratched out by hand, these objects acquire an uncharacteristically expressionist aesthetic. This technique reprises what Nathan remembers from the bombing raids in the war of

1967, when all households in Jerusalem were obliged to apply blackout to their windows. Get close enough to peer through the scratches, however, and you can see that hidden behind the black paint is an etched text, in which you may begin to decipher a biography of dislocation, rupture and loss, as well as new beginnings. Nathan has simply listed where members of her family lived, and moved to and from, through the last several decades, with no explanation. We fill in the gaps ourselves; it is powerful and painful.

*Painting the City Golden* projects a page from an embroidery pattern book (via an overhead projector) onto a large sheet of white paper pinned to the wall. The Tower of David, a citadel near the Jaffa Gate in Old Jerusalem, is rendered in crude checkerboard markings. A colour code is printed down one side, and visitors are invited to colour in the picture using a pot of felt tips in the correct colours. It is a homely, comforting idea and the piece is in many ways nostalgic. But the tower has a lurking monstrosity, with its protruding crosshatched eyes. Nathan tells me that the tower, and the figure of David more widely, has become increasingly emblematic of Zionist colonisation of the city.

I first came to Nathan's work through her 28-minute film documenting *Seven Walks in a Holy City*. I was seduced by her gentle, explorative way of bringing the viewer alongside her. Typically, the organising force of these walks is game structure. The turn of a card determines the parameters for the day, a throw of the dice the direction of travel. The walks build up (from one hour on the first day to seven hours on the seventh) and on each day the focus of her photography changes – portraits, colours, lines, abstracts, landscape etc. Jerusalem may be the most contested piece of real estate in the world, her paths are often blocked – whether by armed guard or a new wall – these walks are an extreme variety of an experience most of us share, of returning to a place we once knew intimately and finding it so altered as to be unrecognisable, often inaccessible. As I imaginatively tread Jerusalem's streets with Idit, I reflect on the contested land rights of the UK: the public rights of way and the recalcitrant landowners that block them and rip out the footpath signs; the common lands that have been increasingly appropriated into private ownership by successive governments since the middle ages, the right to roam and the

gamekeepers (landowners by proxy) that interfere with it.

*Seven Walks* are also represented in *Footnotes Playing Dead* via two more works. *Postcards From a Holy Land* is comprised of postcards made from a selection of the photographs Nathan took. She makes ‘curated’ bundles of these, one photograph from each day’s walk. In a poignant elaboration of this idea, Nathan collaborated with artist Aschely Cone to produce a series of seven small paintings, each one derived from one day’s walk. The result of this collaboration is to shift the focus away from the specifics of depiction, and emphasise an aesthetic of accretion, reminiscent of natural processes such as oxidisation or undersea encrustation. These little paintings seem to dig down into the shared materiality and history of the place that the photographs represent.

The *‘Playing Dead’* of the exhibition title, and this catalogue’s inner cover photograph, remind us that some people at least are only playing dead, and can get up and walk away from the game. It is not that Nathan is proposing play as a *solution*. We are not suggesting that Tic-Tac-Toe can avert a nuclear disaster (unlike the finale of *War Games*, the film directed by John Badham in 1983), but there is a profound point in approaching these thorny and seemingly insoluble divisions between peoples through ludic space. Play elicits a version of human being that is alive to our earlier selves, less trammelled by justifications against, and caveats from, our shared experience. In *What Animals Teach Us About Politics*, Brian Massumi proposes that play actively produces ‘zones of indiscernibility’ where paradox is enacted. What he goes on to say is intriguing: “humans experience paradoxes of mutual inclusion as a breakdown of their capacity to think, and are agitated. The animal, however, is less agitated than activated by them...” and that humans in play, “enter a zone of indiscernibility with the animal” – wherein we might usefully embrace our paradoxes, perhaps.