



I B R A A Z

40 YEARS OF RUNNING ON THE SAME SPOT: A LIBYAN DIARY (PART III) - DECEMBER 2011

Hadia Gana

9 January 2012

INTRODUCTION

Ibraaz is pleased to present the latest installment of Libyan artist and ceramicist Hadia Gana's diary, which she has diligently kept since the revolution in Libya began. Moving on from the drama and turmoil of the last few months, which saw the dramatic death of Muammar Gaddafi and the capture of his son Saif, Gana's latest entry, which covers the months of November and December 2011, charts her and others' efforts to promote culture, environmental awareness and women's issues in post-conflict Libya.

40 YEARS OF RUNNING ON THE SAME SPOT: A LIBYAN DIARY

23 November, Wednesday

The Amazigh, as well as the people of Benghazi, are protesting because none of the ministers are either from an Amazigh city or from Benghazi. It's a tricky time right now, full of hope, of course, but apprehension as well. We have to make this revolution work for all the boys who died and for the country but I sometimes can't help but think that someone out there is manipulating the strings. I guess we can never be sure of what exactly is happening in politics. But still, hope and faith in people must be stronger than fear.

25 November, Friday

I had a meeting at the O2 café this morning with Mouftah (an architect/designer), Eman (a project manager) and Zouhair (a final year architecture student) to talk about our idea of planting a tree for every dead martyr. The project is now splitting into two stages and raising ecological awareness is becoming a major part of it.

Christine Wagner, my friend and writer on culture in Libya, is coming tomorrow through the border at Djerba and I am anxious about the situation with her visa. Amin got her one via the airport, which may present problems as she comes through. Houda tried to reassure me, that the boys at the border told her 'she's

gonna get in even in we have to smuggle her in our car boot'. Better that I don't give Christine too many details that would just freak her out for nothing ... I hope.



Waiting, 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.

26 November, Saturday

This morning we headed to Zwara to check for the best way to send Christine over the border. Christine called and sounded really scared about getting a taxi to the Tunisian border so we decided to go and get her from Djerba, an island off the coast of Libya. The sea-level there is very shallow, and can be reached by road. I picked up Houda's cousin and off we set in my wreck of a car. At the border, I realised I was missing a paper, so we decided to cross it on foot and then get a taxi to take us back. Christine on her side did what I asked her, which was to write a letter defining her work and most important for Libya ... find a stamp! Bloody stamps! They remind me of the mountain of paperwork we all have to do for everything. Christine couldn't find a formal stamp so I told her to go and get it stamped from any shop in the street, which she did. We then drove in a taxi to the Tunisian kiosk and the trouble I had anticipated began. The police guy didn't want to accept her visa because she hadn't passed through the airport. I argued, we waited, tried at another kiosk, argued and waited some more until finally their chief noticed us and came over to us. I explained the problem and Christine's cultural mission to Libya and that sealed it for him - he liked the title I gave her and her job and let her pass with a big smile. On our home turf, I felt more relaxed as I knew we'd pass in



Step on the name Muammar Gaddafi, 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.



whatever way. We waited and finally Houda's cousin came with a friend of his talking loud in Berber. And that is how we had to smuggle in Christine, despite the fact that she had a proper visa.

27 November, Sunday

Early dawn start from Zwara to reach my morning appointment at the central bank to take part in a jury that will choose our future banknote! I know - what an honour! The call for an open competition was announced on TV and in several newspapers but there were fewer participants than I would have expected, less than 100. The board was made up of five artists and graphic designers and five of the bank's employees. Interestingly, there were children participants and some just wrote a critique of the old banknotes, while others wrote about how the competition could have been better organised. We ended up with some interesting samples to discuss in the following week.

Walking out of the bank, Ali Moustafa, Anwar (a graphic designer) and I discussed our next meeting to edit our revolutionary graffiti book. Fozi (a hyperrealist painter) was worried that others had had the same idea and that we had to hurry to get it published. I didn't see the need, as all efforts will be coming from different points of view. In fact, I already know two other 'competitors' but that doesn't bother me - books about us are scarce.

28 November, Monday

Meeting at ECOU (The Engineering Consultancy Office for Utilities) to discuss our 'One tree for our martyrs' plan. The meeting was interesting and some people from the agriculture ministry came. They are good at what they do and seem to be really concerned about trees. They showed us some footage about the terrible deforestation that is happening everywhere these days. Now that there is no law against it, people are cutting down hectares of forests planted as part of forestation plans since the 1970s.

30 November, Wednesday

Tour of Gaddafi's Bab al-Aziziya compound. The boys totally destroyed it and the place is gradually disappearing; people are digging for cables to sell off the copper, ripping off the windows and doors for aluminium, tearing up the wooden structure. All that can be recycled is taken. I personally would have preferred to keep the main building as a monument. As we were walking around there, people asked 'where was the house?', 'where did Gaddafi's people dance while people were being killed?' No trace - therefore no memory?

Amin came home annoyed, telling me that the Tunisian borders have been closed from the Tunisian side because a Libyan dummy attacked one of the officers. I didn't tell Christine about that as she'd freak out and there is still one day before she leaves ...



Tourists from Benghazi visiting Tripoli's old city, 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.



2 December, Friday

Phone call from Amin telling me that we'd have to pass through Dheba, which lies close to the border with Tunisia in the mountains, as the other borders seemed to be staying closed for some time. We set off in the afternoon and passed Dheba just before sunset.

Hamouda, one of my cousins, recounted to us some of the battles that took place on the Dheba border during the revolution, as it was a vital route through the Nafoussa mountains, as we sent Christine and Amin through.

5 December, Monday

This evening I went to the charity dinner Eman and her friends organised to collect money for ten needy families. She had asked me to take some photos and do some filming. The 350-seat hall was packed with talkative ladies of all ages. The dinner aimed to be educational, so the evening was punctuated with political talks.

All afternoon and even late at night, Jumhurya Street was closed for security reasons. It seems that yesterday's battles left three dead. Some other streets were blocked as I was coming home, but still I didn't feel afraid, as the boys were redirecting cars towards safer streets. Is it a huge security issue? When I hear gun fire on and off during the night I get angry more than anything else, as I know it's just some silly boy who is drunk and fighting over a stupid issue that leads to someone being killed. But even with the amount of weapons still around and the lack of official security, the streets are quite safe and criminal activity hasn't really rocketed, as you might expect.

7 December, Wednesday

At ECOU, I bumped into a friend, so we decided to go for lunch. Then I spotted a foreign man I recognised, holding a camera. I wondered if the other part of his team was there as well ... And there she was! Anita McNaught, from Al-Jazeera. I had to thank her for the work she did during the revolution, I was so impressed by her analysis and her stubbornness in understanding what was going on. Saif, Gaddafi's son, made a huge mistake inviting journalists to speak to him, thinking he could fool them! Anyway, it was the first time I actually dared to disturb someone just to shake their hand and utter the cliché: 'I'm a fan of your work.' It turned out she knew a friend of mine and had even read Christine's piece on Libya a few days before.

9 December, Friday

I went with my brother to the old city to clean up the mess left in the collective patio of my studio. I have rented a space in the old city that my father used to draw and sculpt in. Part of the roof was already gone when I got it but a few days ago, a part of the façade crumbled. The old city is an intertwined fabric of soft limestone and lime mortar but since the early 80s, it has been intentionally destroyed, with new cement slowly killing the lime. Three quarters of Libya is limestone and we have no lime to restore our old cities, and



Watching Tripoli, 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.

no artisans who know how to build. I face a painful reality: I have to redo the entire façade, and it will have to be done in grey cement, against all my principles. But I'll replace it with a real lime wall as soon as I can find the right material, the right builder-artisan and the money to do it.

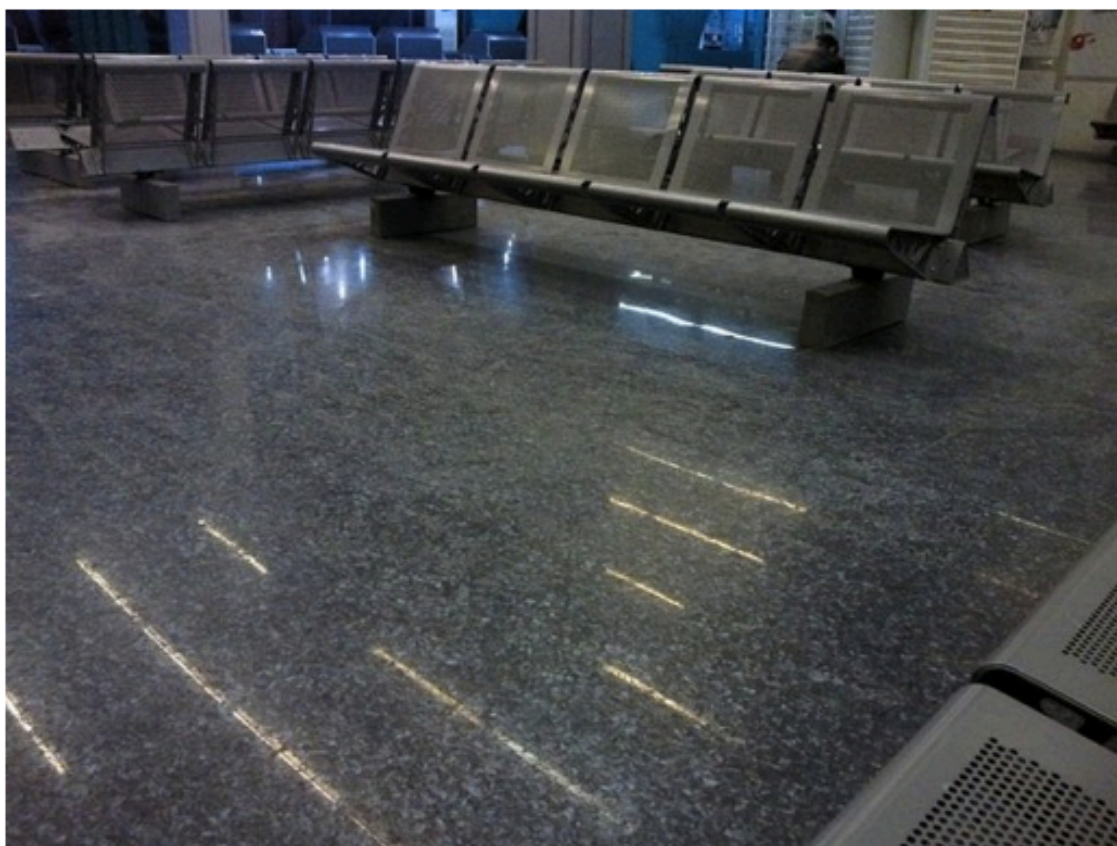
10 December, Saturday

More work at the old city studio. I have a sore back and forearms but we're getting there, the place looks tidy for the moment. In the afternoon I went on my first harbour tour, a nice initiative started by Basma, who has asked a sea captain to take small groups on board his boat to see Tripoli from the sea. Basma is an interesting Tripoli-lover who tries to make people see our country in a positive light. She has a Facebook account called 'My country seen through my heart', where she and others, mostly architects, drop photos of Libya. She now wants to turn it into a picture book. This was the third, free, two-and-a-half-hour trip she had organised and even though it was a small tour, it was enough to give us hope for future sea travel in Libya. I also met a young man who works in the French marines and who talked about the amazing absence of sailing boats in a country with a 2000-km-long coast. I always wondered why Gaddafi hated the sea so much, perhaps he nearly drowned when he was a child. The coast is either occupied by military camps or



We still have some work to do, 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.

occupied by foreign companies or transformed into dumping grounds or black water terminals. All types of visual and ecological pollution are gathered there but somehow I still see beauty in it.



Tripoli airport, 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.

11 December, Sunday

Another morning at the bank, this time to check the winners of the banknote competition. It seems that people are getting to know each other (at least that's my feeling) and are proud to meet, talk, learn and share thoughts. We are building trust.

15 December, Thursday

An early, troubled start for us today, as we tried to fly to Benghazi for the Amazigh festival. Yesterday, we bought the plane tickets in order to give them to a person who was supposed to get us a boarding pass on our arrival at the airport. That was the plan but as plans never go as agreed, we ended up waiting for a check-in attendant who never answered his phone and kept our tickets. The first flight left, then the second



flight left. The third one was the last possible for us, as we had to be there before four in the afternoon. We ended up buying other tickets and getting on a different plane.

In any case, the festival started three hours late. People were entertaining themselves, chatting and singing, but still, there was no reason for the delay. As for the festival, it wasn't bad for a first attempt - at least, to our standards it wasn't bad, as the different groups at least showed up and we could hear the music. But thinking of how it could have been, it was a dilettantish effort. The stage was way too low, encumbered with bunches of flowers, and the speakers weren't sufficient.

17 December, Saturday

These days Mr. Abdul Jalil is being grilled, and he has been making a series of gaffes in his speeches. One such is the polygamy rubbish he spouted in no less than the liberation speech. The last one concerns a new speech in which he reportedly said that he never committed to resigning right after the liberation. There was a comment on the Facebook page for this latest speech, saying 'in ten years he will say that he is not a president but the leader of the revolution!' Why can't they leave when they are still loved and respected? Do they all have to be kicked out? I continue to respect him for taking the load during the hard times but now it's time for him to slide.

24 December, Saturday

I went to a course this morning organised by Yolanda, a British lady married to a Libyan, who has proposed free one-day courses for women. The concept is interesting and entails a series of 'à la carte' courses, in which 12 different subjects are discussed simultaneously. All you have to do is come and register for the two-hour lecture you're interested in. The lecturers came for free, and the place might have been offered for free as well, given that it was a week-end day.

Nadine (a friend 'woman for women' activist) told me about something that might be really interesting; it seems that a local NGO twinned with a similar Italian outfit are planning to restore some houses in the old city of Tripoli. She asked me if I would be interested. Of course! I'm still struggling with my half-destroyed place. Manpower is scarce and expensive, not to mention the cost of the materials.

25 December, Sunday

Yesterday's two-hour course with Yolanda on how to build a business has given my brain cells a nice jolt. It's some time that I am writing down my thoughts about a museum project in my note-book but today I finally wrote them out clearly. Now I need to ask myself more questions about the project ... Indeed, at the start of her lecture, Yolanda asked the ten ladies gathered there: 'Who always asks questions?' We all looked at each other ... nobody! Ha! Typical Libyans, trained not to ask questions.

Sami (a painter and faculty friend) called me to meet at the O2. He told me about his visit to Misrata's Painter's League with Yousef (a friend painter) and Anwar (a graphic designer), who created the new artists



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Wild expression, 2011. Photograph courtesy and © Hadia Gana.



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organisation. Apparently, they are planning a biennale. Just imagining the hassle in terms of choosing the Libyan artists to exhibit puts me off. I know that sounds unhelpful but there are very few artists who actually produce interesting works here. And as there is a total absence of critics or curators (believe it or not, I only learnt the latter word two years ago!), I think it would be very difficult to make a selection.

About the author

Hadia Gana was born in Tripoli in 1973, to a French mother and Libyan father. She first attended Tripoli's French Primary School, then joined a public Libyan school, before going on to study ceramics and glass-making at the faculty of arts and media at the University of Tripoli. She then travelled to Wales, where she got a Masters in Ceramics from the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff. She has taught arts at different levels, ranging from primary to university level. She was awarded a bursary and is planning to do a practice-based PhD in Amsterdam, the subject of which will be the creation of an art and discussion space in Libya. She plans to turn her family home in Tripoli into a cultural hub.