

***Infertile Crescent*** by Nadia Bseiso

**Our Methodology of Writing Image descriptions** by Arseli Dokumaci and Amy Mazowita

Access in the Making (AIM) Lab members Arseli and Amy began working with artist Nadia Bseiso in February 2022 to image-describe her photographs. We held two meetings (each hour-long) over Zoom, connecting with each other from our homes in Jordan, Montreal, and Winnipeg. At our very first meeting, none of us knew where to start. We just knew what to do: **to image-describe**.

Not having a plan, Nadia then offered that she could begin with sharing her stories, giving some background to her photographs (where and why she took them, what she felt, etc.), and then, she suggested, we could decide what to do with them. We all agreed.

Nadia started sharing her stories...

We (Amy and Arseli) listened intently as Nadia talked us through each of her photographs. Following Nadia's lead, we spent the entirety of both meetings notetaking. We were not writing *our* descriptions of Nadia's work but using our fingers to type out and retell the artist's stories as she recalled them. This process went on until the last/the 15<sup>th</sup> photograph.

We were moved by what they had listened to. A whole other world had just been opened up for us by Nadia, her generosity, memories, feelings, and stories. But we would not have been privy to this world by solely looking at Nadia's photographs, and herein lied an ethical responsibility: **Where does artist's story-sharing begin and where does audio-description end?** Throughout her process of story-sharing, Nadia mentioned a few times that she liked to leave something mysterious to the viewer. At some point, she precisely said: "My captions are not very descriptive. I usually don't tell much, and I give room for the viewer for the feeling of it". **When the artist did not**

**prefer to tell much, what, then, was our responsibility (as image describers) to the stories that were so generously shared with us?** No matter how much we were moved by these stories, and no matter how much we wanted to re-share them with the audiences of this exhibition, these stories were simply not ours to re-share. There was an issue of consent. The fact that Nadia generously shared her stories with us, as two people that she is meeting one on one, did not mean she consented to them being re-shared with an abstract mass of audience. We expressed these concerns over ethics with Nadia right away as soon as she was done with telling the story of her last photograph. We collectively decided that it would best be for us (Amy and Arseli) to combine our notes and send them to Nadia so that she can have a look at them and decide which parts of it she agrees to be made public.

As decided, we sent out notes to Nadia. Upon having a quick look at them, Nadia replied saying she wanted to give this a little more time and she would get back to us with her edits. In about 20 days, Nadia sent us her version of the stories, removing some parts, and making other things shorter. This is the text you would find here [insert link]. They are **image descriptions from another world** – the artist, Nadia, telling the stories of her own photographs. These are the (image) descriptions, not of what one is seeing when one looks at a photo, but of what the artist herself is seeing at she looks at the photo that she once took. They are the stories of artist travelling back in time, and taking us/listeners as fellow companions on that journey...

We were, however, still left with the question we asked previously: **Where does artist's story-sharing begin and where does audio-description end?** While we wanted this boundary to remain blurred, we also did not want Nadia's stories to be conflated with image descriptions. We therefore decided each of us to provide image descriptions ourselves. The rest of this text tells how we did that:

**Arseli:**

This was not easy. I was blown away by Nadia's stories, and I was *in* an unknown place they that took me to. I didn't know how *not* to see the same photographs from that place. I didn't know how to describe them *not* through the prism of Nadia's stories. For the record: it's not that there is anything problematic about seeing things through "a prism". (We all see things through a prism – whether that prism is explicit or implicit to us). It is just that seeing them through Nadia's stories embodied the risk that I might be crossing a boundary that I should not.

So, I decided to take some time off, and let the time do its job of distancing.

I went back to the photographs about a month after our last meeting with Nadia. I briefly looked at them and wrote down immediately my first impressions, what I saw and felt. Not much thinking. And these were [add link] the descriptions that came out.

To be transparent about my own social positioning and the inevitable prism I carry with me because of who I am: I was born and raised in Southwest Turkey, in similar Mediterranean landscapes that Nadia's photographs depict. As I look at Nadia's photos, I could almost feel the dryness of air, the arid soil, the taste of olives. I recalled the desperate need to quench my thirst in the burning heat of summer during my childhood. I felt the land calling for water. I felt the smokes of the wildfires through which I passed this summer in Marmaris, Turkey. I smelled the smoke. As a woman grown up in a patriarchal country hostile to women, I felt the dominance of man (Hence my description, "(Too) Many men in a pond") and the resistance of woman against that hegemony.

### **Amy:**

It was clear early on that there is much more to Nadia's work than what might be noticed at first glance. There were stories and histories entwined with the land and water; emotions and memories with the people and places. While all captured by

Nadia's camera, some of these stories were meant to be shared, and some not. They were meant only for the artist herself.

Instead of simply describing the photographs as they appeared to us, our process became one of listening, learning, reflecting, and feeling. We followed along as Nadia described her artistic process, realizing that her photographs are not only representative of specific places and moments in time. Rather, they are carefully chosen reflections of landscape, nationhood, and collective experience. These meetings, where we traded the constructs of descriptive writing for thoughtful listening, reshaped how we imagined the image descriptions we had set out to write.

We, along with Nadia, invite you to sit with these photographs. View/read them for as long or as little as you like. Read or listen to Nadia's descriptions of her artwork. Do the same with our (Arseli and Amy's) descriptions of the images as we perceive them and as they have affected us.