

***Reimagining Return to the Marshes*** by Tamara Abdul Hadi

**Our Methodology of Writing Image descriptions** by Yolanda Muñoz and Nicholas Goberdhan

### **I) Introduction:**

In this description of Tamara Abdul Hadi's work titled, *Reimagining Return to the Marshes (2022)*, AIM Lab members Yolanda Muñoz and Nicholas Goberdhan utilized several different techniques to develop a collective visual description. From exchanges through emails, collective editing on Google docs and an interview with Tamara, what was produced was something far beyond a written description, but a special relationship between many worlds.

### **II) Tamara's Role in the Description Process**

Tamara Abdul Hadi generously agreed to a two-hour interview, where she explained us the reasoning to choose a photo to superimpose it over the photos included in the 1977 edition of the book by Gavin Young *Return to the Marshes: Life with the Marsh Arabs of Iraq*. (Collins.) This way, Tamara walked us through her creative process, and why she had chosen some images to offer a counter-representation of the life in the Iraqi Marshes, which remains quite similar to that of the seventies. Despite the rapid and intense changes in the country -and in the world- the Iraqi Marshes remain mostly unscathed, but Young's version of the book lacked the most important element for Tamara: the emphasis on the people who live and thrive there.

Tamara shared during our conversation that it was also an interesting exercise for her to describe and explain the reasons behind every choice of images. Where there were only landscapes or empty boats in the Young's book, Tamara wanted to bring the smiles of young lads and the hard work of the girls and women. Her work implied an important search of images among colleagues and friends who were generous to share the images of their families when they visited the Marshes in the same epoch.

### **III) Yolanda's Description Process**

Yolanda barely knew about the existence of the Iraqi Marshes before approaching Tamara's work. The Euphrates River has lived in her imagination since she was a child in close connection with the Tigris River and Mesopotamia as the cradle of civilization. But that was it. Lost in the turmoil of international news about war, Yolanda knew nothing about this territory and its strong inhabitants. She listened to Tamara as if she was guiding her through a journey to a land full of mystery: the soft feeling of the feet against the humid lands, the homes made from reeds, where entire families shared their food with the visitors back in the seventies and now with her. For Yolanda, it was clear that the intention of each photo had to be part of the description to encourage the viewers to enjoy this voyage through the Iraqi Marshes where past and present coexist

in a careful selection and sequence of images. Yolanda wants the viewer to enjoy this piece as much as she enjoyed the generous interaction with Tamara, which allowed her to understand what is behind the images that comprise it. Image description had to be meaningful for both people with and without vision impairments, particularly in the case of a rich territory that very few people have had the privilege to visit in person.

#### **IV) Nicholas' Description Process**

In describing Nicholas' methodology for writing the description, there were differing styles which encompassed a few trials and errors. Coming from previous experience with writing short image descriptions for online lectures, Nicholas applied the same technique to Tamara's work. However, after deliberation, it became clear that such transferable frameworks are not fully encompassing to artwork. On further reflection, Nicholas pondered through the ways to enmesh that often "break-taken-away" feeling from art, alongside an accessible description within a disability justice focus. The first iteration was laconic to preserve brevity, but the different textures, emotions and historical context were unable to be visualized from such framing. After deliberation and in conversation with Yolanda, Nicholas created a style of image description that sought to capture the look, feel, and particularities of each page of Tamara's artwork. Instances of the "*faded aesthetic*," to the "*red nail polish, adding an extra dimension of colour*," were in concert to an interview that Yolanda and Nicholas had with Tamara. Alongside capturing the aesthetic, segments of the interview in which Tamara described the history and context of the images were added as Nicholas and Yolanda aimed to create a description that gave contextual understanding, but also illuminated the details of the artistic intervention.

#### **V) Bridging Thoughts**

There was a special relationship that developed between Tamara, the artwork, Yolanda, and Nicholas. For Nicholas, he was immersed in the *spatiality of knowledges* between everyone in the conversation. Reflecting on Tamara's comments and artistic intervention of being an insider-outsider to the Marshes, for Nicholas, his experience fell within the in-betweens, a sort of 'insider; insider-outsider' positionality. Though Nicholas is new to in depth analyses of Iraq, the *Land and Accessible Futures* event by the AIM Lab allowed for a proximately near relationship with the artist, which would be difficult to cultivate such personable connections in traditional displays of art. The semicolon, representing a pronounced paused, reflects the distance but communality in extending Tamara's artwork through the focus of disability justice. Following spatiality, the inherent *interdependence* to create an accessible description of Tamara's artwork had a profound impact on Nicholas. For him, it demonstrated how incredibly powerful and influential artwork further becomes when placed in conversation with communities that have anti-oppressive work in mind. Themes by Tamara of decolonization with the stolen treasures in the Ziggurat of Ur, the militarization of rural landscape through the construction of a road fitted for tanks in the Marshes, become further amplified when

written with an accessible description. Adding another supplemental layer to Tamara's work, Nicholas emphasizes the close relationship with Tamara and Yolanda that allows observers to witness the visual photographs, but also be transported to the intentions and lived histories behind the image.

On her side, Yolanda very much enjoyed this carefully crafted counter-representation of the inhabitants of the Marshes: the colonial view of Gavin Young's book was exposed in the representation of the landscape, with little or no consideration for the humans who live there. Tamara's work presents her fresh take on the life in the Marshes: hardworking women of all ages, smiling young fishers, an ecosystem that has changed significantly due to climate change and other factors. The water buffaloes that know what to do every day to graze in peace and come back at sunset; the pelicans that also make enjoy the peace and the richness of the Marshes. Yolanda, as a wheelchair user, knows that she will never physically visit the place. However, the conversation with Tamara and the images are so eloquent, that she felt as if she was there, breathing a life where real-time travel over the world and speed are not the measure of the days.