Introduction
Omar Al-Qattan

"Beware of saying to them that sometimes different cities follow one another on the same site and under the same name, born and dying without knowing one another, without communication among themselves. At times even the names of the inhabitants remain the same, and their voices' accent, and also the features of their faces; but the gods who live beneath names and above places have gone off without a word and outsiders have settled in their place."
Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities, 1972, pp30–31

It is a tragic and terrible shame that Dor Guez's first solo show in London should be held at The Mosaic Rooms under the shadow of continuing civil war and confessional violence in the Arab world. We who had the privilege of growing up in the mixed cities of that region—Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo—have seen those rich urban tapestries break apart. It is as if the fabric of our region, however rich, ancient and colourful, simply could not withstand the onslaught of modernity, whether it took the form of Zionism and its ethno-colonial project, or secular Arab nationalism in all its many guises, or, more recently, Islamic nationalism, in all its varieties. Today, the bleeding continues—Iraq has lost many of its most ancient minorities, Syria will probably go the same way, Lebanon is an ethnic and confessional time bomb, Israel's Palestinian citizens and those living under occupation are increasingly marginalised and threatened with expulsion, and Egypt's Copts are living in profound insecurity. Needless to say, citizens of all ethnicities and confessions, particularly the poor and disenfranchised, also find themselves hostage to unspeakable injustice and destruction—a condition tragically shared with many other regions in the world today.

However, this reality was also one of the reasons we chose to invite Dor Guez to show at The Mosaic Rooms. For Guez is a product of a rare mixity that was ironically the result of two major, but antithetical historical events: the expulsion of most of Palestine's citizens from their homeland in 1948, and the subsequent creation of the state of Israel, of which he is now a citizen. Guez's mother is from Al-Lydd[1], daughter of one of the few Palestinian families to remain in the city after most of its 20,000 inhabitants were driven out and never allowed to return after the 1948 war. Guez's heritage is also Tunisian Jewish on his father's side, immigrants to the new state of Israel in 1950s and to Al-Lydd, subsequently renamed Lod. It is no surprise then that his work should be so preoccupied with the dynamics of majority-minority relations, with the disappearance of minority cultures, and with the personal—yet often heroic—attempts to keep their memories alive. But this work also invites us to question our own definitions of nationalism and ethnicity and to reflect on the writing of history, as the artist explains later in this book, in his conversation with Mitra Abbaspour.

As a child growing up in Beirut in the 1970s, I was discouraged from enquiring about a person's religion, even though it was extremely difficult to miss the undercurrents of confessional divisions all around us (or indeed the ostentatious religious symbols worn by many people). My parents, like many secular nationalists of the time, dreamt of a society free from these divisions and kept referring to a past—but which past?—in which everyone lived in harmony, Muslims, Christians and Jews (rarely were atheists mentioned in that context). It was in that spirit that we were ordered not to discriminate between people on the basis of their religion. Yet perhaps our parents were also idealistic and naïve, for they underestimated the depth of confessional loyalties and the extent to which our societies remained entangled in the Ottoman system of majority rule and minority autonomy, which clearly could no longer function in the post-war realities of the Levant.

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[1] The city is famous as the birthplace of St George's mother. He is revered by all the monotheistic religions in Palestine as a saint (under different names, including al-khader) and also patron saint of England. Yet its Arab Christian and Muslim histories are hardly visible today and it has become notorious as the drugs ghetto of Israel and one of its poorest and most violent urban centres.

In that sense, as we hope you will see from this rich and moving exhibition, Guez's work is also a reaffirmation of different possibilities for his city and, by extension, for the region. He offers a defiant assertion of a continuing presence in the face of historical erasure and a seemingly relentless contemporary dynamic of denial and destruction that is both violent and irrational. This artistic assertiveness, archival and fragile as it is, and shrouded in tragedy, nonetheless uncovers something else: an obstinate, clinging presence that will not go away. 40 Days, as Guez's show is entitled, marks the end of the period of mourning, the cusp, as it were, between remembering and starting anew. A Christian Palestinian archive for sure, but one brought to forceful life by a living descendant, even if his identity has been reshaped by history and circumstance. But then which one of us can claim an unchanging identity?

My own paternal grandmother was born in Al-Lydd and the city was the last place of refuge for my father's family as they fled Palestine in Summer 1948, on their long way to exile in Amman, Jordan. So it is particularly fitting—and ironic—that Guez's show should today be hosted here in London: two descendants of Lyddites, one Israeli Palestinian and the other British Palestinian, reaffirming a common past in the capital city of the old empire, which holds so much of the responsibility for the collapse of an ancient, tolerant and open Levant and, tragically, whose more recent meddling in the region has proven equally catastrophic.

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