



PUBLICATION

Jun 26, 2019

# NOTES FROM THE FIELD: ARTOLUTION & SYRIAN REFUGEES BY JOEL BERGNER



CHIME FOR CHANGE is proud to partner with Artolution, a global nonprofit organization that empowers communities through collaborative public arts initiatives and creative experiences to promote healing, resilience and positive social change. Read more about our partnership [here](#).

Artolution has worked with local artists to facilitate workshops and create public works of art across 30 countries. To address the humanitarian crisis caused by the war in Syria, Artolution programming at refugee camps in Jordan provides Syrian children with a safe platform for creative expression and trauma relief, and provides Syrian refugee artists with the opportunity to work in their field and engage youth in their

community.

Artolution's co-founder and co-director, Joel Bergner, kept detailed field notes during his visit to the Azraq Syrian Refugee Camp in Jordan in July 2017. Below, excerpts from his notes describe conditions in the camp, the work of Artolution, and moments of joy shared with refugee children and artists.

## On Conditions at the Camp

In contrast to Za'atari, a camp [in Jordan for Syrian refugees] that feels more and more like a town with its bustling marketplace and the residents' DIY attitude toward organizing their environment, Azraq is a highly organized hell-on-earth. Why anyone thought it was a good idea to plop tens of thousands of human beings in a desert wasteland in endless rows of white one-room metal structures that can't be moved around (so families can't move next to each other, as in Za'atari) I will never understand. Each "village" is far from the others, and the nearest supermarket is a long walk away for many, an especially difficult challenge for the elderly, mothers with young children and the disabled. The summers are scorching, the winters freezing, and dust storms swirl around and into everyone's eyes.

People are not allowed to find their own work, and Za'atari's black market is impossible in Azraq, as it is very remote. This means that child labor is far less common than in Za'atari, and most kids attend school. But it also means that adults are idle, leading to further depression and despair.

*Some areas of the camp have finally received electricity this year, but where we worked in Village 2 there was still none. No A/C, no heat, no TV, communal outhouses, war-related trauma and no work – all in all, an environment*

## *reminiscent of the moon.*

Some areas of the camp have finally received electricity this year, but where we worked in Village 2 there was still none. No A/C, no heat, no TV, communal outhouses, war-related trauma and no work – all in all, an environment reminiscent of the moon. For people used to modern living in Syria, this is misery. Incredibly, this camp was extensively planned with the intention of improving on the mistakes of Za'atari. It may be more organized, but we heard that when faced with the prospect of coming here, many refugees choose to return to Syria instead. That should be an indication of how terrible the conditions are.

### **Project Planning and Execution**

[We had] five intensive and chaotic weekdays with the youth and artists. Altogether, we managed to paint two rows of six caravans (the white structures that people call home) plus another three-caravan mural, as well as a "foundstrument" and some canvas art. We worked with about a million children (it was hard to count, officially 40; but really 80 – 120) and met some amazing people along the journey, strengthened our relationship with the International Rescue Committee (IRC), and had a positive experience with the local artists. I would say it was a mostly successful project overall, though also complete madness...

Things began normally enough. We met with two groups of 20 youth, aged around 10 to 17 or so, in an IRC center. Some were adolescent boys from an IRC program for unaccompanied minors, [which supports] those Syrian teens who are not with their families. We had the chance to bond with several of them during our paint-mixing day, and we knew they were an important group to engage, as the IRC had made clear to us. There were also some smart and active teenage girls. After coming up with plenty of ideas, we were excited to get started!

Once we were on the ground in the community ready to paint, reality set in. Unlike our first project in Za'atari, which had been in a fenced-off youth center in which guards could control who came in, [this project

was in] the middle of a neighborhood where groups of children roamed, ready to pounce on unsuspecting artists. We quickly realized that our groups of 20 older kids could suddenly become 40 or 50 children of all ages. A toddler could wander up and start pouring paint out on the ground or grab a brush and paint blue scribbles in the yellow area.

*Kids would also "borrow" paint and brushes to bring to their homes, where they and their families would paint their own murals. Despite this practice quickly diminishing our supplies, I found it endearing, especially when both children and adults would bring us to proudly show off their handiwork.*

[Unfortunately,] some boys destroyed the foundstrument by smashing it with giant rocks. And the notion that the artists would have some alone time to work on the finer details? An impossible fantasy! A group of 10 pre-teens would surround you while you attempted to concentrate on spray painting a portrait, repeating your name endlessly, standing within an inch of your arm, poking your back, and attempting to play with the spray paint. I experimented with humoring them, being strict and simply ignoring them, none of which was very successful.

On the one hand, we found ways to engage these large groups of random kids. The local artists, volunteers and [Artolution's co-founder and co-director] Max and I would all sing songs with them, joke around, engage them in painting, have them help us mix new colors, and get them to help build the foundstrument. They loved the project, had huge smiles on their faces, and were overjoyed to see us each day. We formed bonds with them and had many touching moments. Visitors to the project would remark that the kids were so happy, and that this experience was truly special and unique for them.

On the other hand, many of the older teenagers, especially the

unaccompanied boys, barely participated. Many stopped showing up after the first day, explicitly telling us that all chaos and little kids did not interest them, which I can't say I blame them for at all. It was clear that in order to engage this important demographic, we would need a more controlled space where we could focus on them without the distractions. The local artists, though clearly enjoying many aspects of the project, also found the chaos exhausting and stressful. Of course, Max and I were similarly affected, and each day felt like an uphill battle.

## **Standout Participants**

One 11-year-old boy named Mahmoud had actually worked on a past project with Max several years ago. He was excited to be involved again, and was very affectionate with us and even protective, often making other kids leave us alone when they were being particularly mischievous. Noor, a girl who may have been about 12, was also very affectionate and joyful, always enthusiastically engaged in the project. She often invited us to tea, so we ended up meeting many members of her family. One teenage girl who ended up being the model for one of the murals, Dareen, had many interesting contributions to the mural ideas as well as the painting.

## **Local Artists and Collaborators**

Our favorite artist was Mohammed, a thirty-year old who has experience creating murals around the camp and is exceptional with the kids. He gets them excited with rousing songs, but I also witnessed many intimate moments in which he was working a small group of little ones, showing them painting techniques. He's a natural leader, and was also outspoken from day one that the Azraq Camp artists need support and that he has great ambitions for his art and working with the community. For Max and me, Mohammed holds the key to future programming in the camp. Two other artists, Samir and Ismail, were also great guys, and we enjoyed getting to know them. We are dedicated to setting up a youth arts program with the three of them.

Luckily, the woman who can help make this dream come true, Radwa



from IRC, happened to visit the project during a great moment, with all the kids having a blast creating art and then playing the foundstrument. She was inspired by the joy she witnessed.

## Conclusions

Given the circumstances and the fact that we were a bit overambitious, not all the sections of the murals were successful artistically-speaking, but there were some areas that could stand alone as finished pieces. We felt good about the engagement with the kids and community, despite the less-than-ideal circumstances. My one regret was not being able to more fully engage the older teenagers, though I hope we will be able to do so in the future.

*On the final day, as darkness descended on Azraq, groups of kids surrounded us and gave us hugs and kisses and clung to us as we left. It was an emotional goodbye, and we all hoped to see each other in the future.*

On the final day, as darkness descended on Azraq, groups of kids surrounded us and gave us hugs and kisses and clung to us as we left. It was an emotional goodbye, and we all hoped to see each other in the future.

We felt that we were leaving with strong connections to the community, the artists, the kids and the IRC, and there is no doubt that Azraq is now one of the strongest candidates for ongoing programming.













