



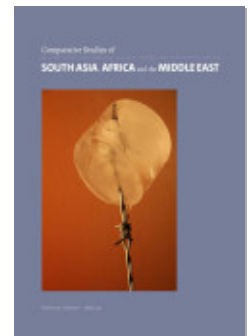
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Art, Activism, and the Presence of Memory in Palestine:
Interview with Palestinian Artist Rana Bishara

Lila Abu-Lughod, Rana Bishara

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume
41, Number 1, May 2021, pp. 122-145 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



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Interview with Palestinian Artist Rana Bishara

Lila Abu-Lughod

Lila Abu-Lughod: We are so pleased that you have given us the opportunity to feature some of your artwork on the covers of the three issues of volume 41 of *CSSAAME*. I wonder if we could start by your telling us a bit more about these works. One is a nest filled with prickly pear cactus “eggs.” The second is a remarkable piece of the natural cactus fiber that appears so often in your work. It looks uncannily like Edvard Munch’s 1893 painting *The Scream* and you have titled it *Patient Scream*, with the word *patient* having the double meaning in Arabic of “patience” and “cactus.” The third, which appears on the cover of this first issue in the volume, is *Hunger Strike/Ticking Freedom*, a photograph of a melting ice cube dripping down a piece of barbed wire (fig. 1). I’d like to start with this because barbed wire is a ubiquitous part of the landscape of occupied Palestine. It appears in various works of yours. In this series that also includes a photograph of barbed wire in a glass of water and salt, titled *Hunger Strike/Broken Imprisonment* (fig. 2). It is unexpected. Can you tell us more about it?

Rana Bishara: *Hunger Strike/Ticking Freedom* from 2016 is the second of a pair of works that began with *Hunger Strike/Broken Imprisonment*, which depicts a piece of barbed wire in a glass of water with salt.

I created this specific artwork, among others dedicated to prisoners, when I was following a major hunger strike by Palestinian political prisoners in August 2016. As an artist I felt a moral duty to get involved and to support their families. I went regularly to meetings and demonstrations both in historic Palestine and in the solidarity tents set up in Bethlehem’s Manger Square and Dheisheh refugee camp, near where I was living at the time. I created and shared online and via social media this art piece in solidarity. After forty days on hunger strike, the prisoners had just escalated the strike by refusing to drink water. I inserted barbed wire in a water glass to show what the state of the body would be after such a long period with no food or vitamins, with only water and salt keeping them alive. Salt is essential and the Israeli prison authorities often deny prisoners salt when they are striking, as special punishment.

If you look sideways at the glass you can see that the barbed wire is enlarged and looks broken where the water ends. This was my way of demanding, visually and conceptually, a break in the relentless imprisonment and an end to arrests and administrative detention. These prisoners had only their bodies left to fight with as they demanded their basic rights, such as medical treatment, not to mention freedom. Despite having lost so much weight and being deprived of vitamins and minerals and in some cases coming close to death, they still resisted. Right now, for example, I am thinking about the administrative detainee Maher Al-Akhras, who has been on a hunger strike for eighty-three days.¹

The moment the hunger strikers decided to stop drinking water and salt, I decided to freeze the cup of water with the barbed wire in it to express my sorrow and fear at the irresponsibility of the Israeli state. This was a critical



Figure 1. Rana Bishara, *Hunger Strike/Ticking Freedom* (2016), barbed wire and frozen water. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

moment when these prisoners could actually lose their lives. Water and salt were the only things that had been keeping their bodies from collapsing. At a certain point, the frozen water and salt started melting and dripping onto the barbed wire. Those drops spilling onto the barbed wire resembled the tears of the prisoners and their worried loved ones. It was hard to keep the ice from melting, and still the barbed wire kept them imprisoned, the dripping, salty water symbolizing the ticking time that is running out as the strikers risked their lives and irreversible physical damage.

LA-L: Many artists stick to one form and medium but your art practice is unusually adventurous and creative both in form and materials. You are what we might call a multidisciplinary artist. You paint on canvas and paper and do printmaking and photography. But you also make three-dimensional sculptures and installations, such as the monument commemorating the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon. You set that up in Bagnolet-Paris, France. You even create live performance pieces. You work with a striking range of materials and textures including cactus, cactus fiber, chocolate, glass, bread, balloons, barbed wire, and plastic restraint ties. You are perhaps best known for your recurrent use of the prickly



Figure 2. Rana Bishara, *Hunger Strike/Broken Imprisonment* (2016), barbed wire in a glass of water and salt. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.



Figure 3. Rana Bishara, *Bannest—Cactus Nest* (2020), prickly pear cactus fruit in a nest. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

symbol of Palestinian perseverance, the cactus, which you have pickled in jars, cut into jigsaw pieces, dipped in chocolate, carved, or, as in the image that will appear on the cover of *CSSAAME* 41:2, put in a nest (fig. 3). Why do you insist on continually exploring these materials, some sensuous and natural, and some highly artificial, even while it makes some of your artwork perishable and much of it hard to hang in art galleries?

RB: Looking back, I see themes in my artwork that relate to sociopolitical, moral, and human issues of suffering, especially women's, due to politics and Palestinians' ethnic cleansing. As a visual artist, I find inspiration from details of everyday life, whether from a smiling child, my surroundings, what I witness daily, and even sounds and fragrances in memory. The medium must serve both the artwork as well as the concept. So I'm constantly changing these. I look for materials that can communicate the complexity of the political situation about which I make my visual and sculptural works and even my performances.

Some of my aesthetic influences came from my family. I grew up in an artistic family, which included four generations of goldsmiths. My father was thirteen years old when he first learned the goldsmith profession

from his father. I used to enjoy watching him form and shape silver and gold into amazing shapes—arabesque designs, flowers, and organic forms—and my father's artistic spirit had a huge influence on me and shaped my artistic taste. Our heritage continued through jewelry that played with abstract and geometric shapes or used Arabic calligraphy. As you know, because you have a few of these paintings, I often use Arabic calligraphy in my works on paper, and even the glass book I made in 1998 called *Nakba Glass Book—Homage to 531 Palestinian Villages and Towns 1948–2000*.² The book was constructed from ten glass sheets with the names of the villages and towns written in black ink. My choice of glass for a book of documentation has an iconographic political function, showing the fragility, urgency, and necessity to resolve the political issues and address the right of the refugees to return, as stipulated by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194. I also used calligraphy in a series of artworks that included *My Mona Lisa*, a self-portrait written with my diary that I made in 1996 depicting myself as a free woman with my own perspective on life and feminism (fig. 4).

But back to the land. To belong is to feel a connection to the land, but when land is in dispute, so is one's identity. The beauty of my country, especially the Galilee area



Figure 4. Rana Bishara, *My Mona Lisa* (1996), collage on paper. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

where my village, Tarshiha, is located, is overwhelming. We live in a Mediterranean landscape, populated with villages that spread like diamonds across the mountains and hills. Fields are adorned with ancient olive trees and dotted with crowns of cacti. The green terraced hills are marked with old castles and the whole landscape is inlaid with the elegant geometry of Arab/Islamic architecture. From the mountains of northern Palestine where I grew up, and where my ancestors lived for centuries, one can look onto southern Lebanon and out to the Mediterranean, both of which we have been connected to and from which we are now, in a sense, cut off.

In the searing reality of occupation, nature became my solace. Nonetheless, when I used to walk through the olive groves around my village, secretly reading and memorizing Mahmoud Darwish's poems, I was confronted everywhere with the consequences of the occupation. I saw uprooted olive groves. Looking at cactus plants safeguarding the ruins of demolished towns and villages reminded me constantly of the Nakba (the Palestinian catastrophe) since they were omnipresent remnants of the 531 villages and towns demolished and

depopulated in 1948. I started collecting cactus fiber from the rubble as a form of resistance and stitched them together, as if trying to bind Palestine together again. These delicate shapes I named after our coastal cities, for example, Haifa Balconies. I documented that in photography in the early 1990s. All these experiences affected my visual memory and became the core of my artistic vision. Now you walk around and see that the whole scene is changed with the fake forests all around our historic Palestine and even in Beit Jala in the West Bank, where I lived for many years. On the boundaries of Jerusalem they are manufacturing the so-called Holy Basin, whose aim is to expand Jewish settlements while preventing Palestinian cities, villages, and refugee camps from developing or expanding. The National Jewish Fund planted these forests that distorted the indigenous landscape as a tactic in conquering the land until another illegal settlement could be built. This actually changed the acidity of the soil.

LA-L: Yes, many scholars have written about these forests with foreign pine trees, planted to hide destroyed villages. I didn't realize they also changed the acidity of the soil, but of course they would. But let's talk about the way your work engages the classic, iconic, and some might consider clichéd symbols of Palestinian national identity. You play with these symbols in sometimes disturbing ways—as does the artist Mona Hatoum, who in the 1990s used hair for a kufiyya and in a 1996 piece put straight pins in bars of Nablus olive oil soap. But



Figure 5. Rana Bishara, *Olive Kufiyya* (2018), olives and olive leaves installation. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

you often engage these symbols in appreciative ways, as when you recently made a kufiyya out of olives and their leaves (fig. 5). Why do you work and rework these iconic symbols of Palestine?

RB: The political is personal for me because of my context living as a Palestinian in the 1948 area of historic Palestine. I lean toward conceptually oriented work on sociopolitical issues. Garments, such as the men's black and white kufiyya as well as women's traditional embroidered dresses, were early inspirations and aesthetic influences. The house key is a strong political symbol of the desire of millions of Palestinian refugees to return. How many exiled Palestinians retain not just the keys to their stolen houses but the deeds to their properties expropriated by the Zionists? These find their way into my art. *Olive Kufiyya* was created from fresh olives and their leaves to celebrate my father's life and that of our ancestors in this land, and to honor beauty, fertility, unity, and resistance, and as the symbol of Palestinian nationalism and particularly the great Arab revolt in Palestine, 1936–39.

One of my earliest artworks was titled *Sweetie* (1997). It marked the beginning of my iconographic combination of local materials and symbols of Palestinian identity and history. The artwork consists of fresh green prickly pear cactus, half dipped in chocolate, the sharp thorns of the cactus sticking out of the thick dark chocolate. The absurdity of our life under occupation was what I had been struggling to accept and understand as I was growing up, and until now. As the indigenous population, we are deprived of all this breathtaking beauty and quiet because of the settler colonial power of the Israelis.

The cactus symbolizes Palestinian existence and resistance because of the way it continues stubbornly to mark the old boundaries of the towns and villages that have been demolished since 1948. The sweetness of the chocolate represents what we have lost because despite the beauty and fertility of our homeland, we can't enjoy it. Because it is occupied we can't get the sweetness or enjoy its fruits. We wish for this.

Cactus is a vital symbol and medium for me, whether fresh, pickled, or just the dried fiber of the plants. It captures our endurance as this kind of cactus (*sabr*, which in Arabic also means "patience") keeps regrowing in rubble. I have collected cacti from the fields and formed them into two- and three-dimensional pieces. Since cacti are omnipresent signs of the former existence of the villages and towns totally demolished

and depopulated in 1948, I just started collecting the fiber from the rubble. Sometimes I carve deep into the thick fallen dry trunks. For the *Patient Scream*, the image that will appear on the cover of *CSSAAME* 41:3 (fig. 6), I happened upon this piece of cactus fiber. It seemed to express my feelings about what had been going on for so long—that our patience has expired. After waiting for so long for nothing to change, and in the face of the rage, frustration, and disappointment, we want to scream after being patient so long as we are subjected to personal, political, social, and economic assault. Some of the suffering that Palestinian families have endured is the hijacking of the bodies of the sixty-seven martyrs who were assassinated and are withheld from their families. Some corpses have been held in Israeli morgues for over five years to be used as future bargaining chips.

Homage to Palestine (1999) was an early conceptual work that made quite an impact (fig. 7). I placed prickly pear cactus in a preserving jar to suggest how it feels to be trapped as a Palestinian "minority" and treated as third-class citizens in Israel. That's why Ahmad Sa'di, who coedited the book *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* with you, chose to use it on the cover of his book about us: *Thorough Surveillance: The Genesis of Israeli Policies of Population Management, Surveillance and Political Control towards the Palestinian Minority*. The sculpture/object *Bannest—Cactus Nest*, mentioned earlier (fig. 3), was my comment on the systematic racist policies against the indigenous population in Palestine, not just through revoking ID cards or residence permits and policies to disrupt families but also through laws like the 2003 law against "Family Unification" in which the spouses of Israeli citizens (mostly Palestinians) who are residents of the Occupied Palestinian Territories are banned from living in Israel. This splits families or forces them to leave altogether to be together. Or to live in constant fear of being found out.

Because I want to talk about what I've seen in Palestine, I like to use indigenous Palestinian materials that carry symbolic weight. I used olive oil and soil in the art piece titled *Sarrak Al-Ziet (Olive Oil Thief)* (1999). This was another version of the glass book but in an installation form in the Darat Al Funun Summer Academy with renowned Syrian artist Marwan Kassab Bacha in Amman, Jordan. It was subtitled *Nakba Glass Book—Homage to 531 Palestinian Villages and Towns 1948–2000*. These villages were systematically demolished and replaced with illegal Jewish settlements. The settlers

stole not only the land but the names of the villages too, erasing them from the map. For this piece, I arranged 531 small glass cups containing olive oil on piles of red soil arranged in rows in a room that was 15" by 12" by 10". The soil symbolized the land of historic Palestine and olive oil the uprooting of olive trees, which were often moved from the Arab villages and planted in the new Jewish settlements to give the impression that the squatters were living in ancient environs.

LA-L: Speaking of history, I'd like to talk a bit about your MFA thesis art project at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD) called *Blindfolded History* (fig. 8a–b). It was exhibited as part of a groundbreaking show in 2003 called "Made in Palestine" at the Station Museum of Contemporary Art in Houston, Texas. A striking installation of iconic media images from the Palestinian Nakba and beyond, screened in chocolate on suspended glass panels, it perfectly exemplifies for me the way your art is simultaneously political, conceptual, and material.

RB: I wanted *Blindfolded History* to illuminate the open wound of the 1948 Nakba and to bear witness to the bitter reality of military occupation and the dehumanization that has been visited upon Palestinians since. Our history and struggle are fundamental to my art, as are the mass-media that represent and more often misrepresent us—TV, radio, print, and the internet. The visual images from the environment I grew up in fill my work, whether the graffiti of the 1987 intifada (uprising) or the TV images that connected me to my homeland during the period when I was studying in the United States on a Fulbright at SCAD and then living in New York City (2001–5).



Figure 6. Rana Bishara, *Patient Scream* (2010), dried cactus fibers. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

Blindfolded History consists of fifty-five sheets of glass installed in a space representing the (then) fifty-five years of the Israeli occupation over the Palestinian people and their land. We are now at seventy-two years. Each sheet of glass carries an artwork silk-screened with unsweetened chocolate. Each panel represents a chapter of Palestinian history, between the years 1948 to 2003 when the work was made. I used media images that I had collected over the years from newspapers, magazines, and the internet. These pictures taken by journalists include images of Palestinian women, men, and children being tortured, killed, and humiliated.



Figure 7. Rana Bishara, *Homage to Palestine* (1999), cactus in a preserving jar. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

I silk-screened the images onto the glass sheets with unsweetened chocolate, very thinly and delicately to mirror the grainy quality of the photos.

Produced while a temporary émigré in America, my work came into being through watching my country's evolving violent history one step removed on television and the internet.

The process of producing the images was a part of the message. They were first captured in the lenses of journalists' cameras and then circulated on computer or TV screens. Later they were revealed to the public and became pixilated. I transferred them onto transparencies and then onto silk-screen with photo emulsion in

a darkroom. Finally, they were manually printed with melted bitter chocolate on the glass sheets. This long process of transferring the images from medium to medium suggests the way news is manipulated. Many of the scenes in these photographs I knew of first hand, but printing the images was exhausting and disturbing, bringing forth feelings of despair. If you think about it, the chocolate was also transformed from one state to another—from a state of being melted by heat into a state of being fixed—frozen in an iconic artwork. With this fixing, memory and history become embedded in the material itself.

LA-L: In his essay about the exhibit, the curator Tex Kerschen focused on what you did to history. "Palestinian art," he wrote,

is sophisticated, circumspect, and charged with strong slow-burning emotions. It is densely packed with history, both the recent fifty-five years of Israeli occupation and also the several thousand years of history that preceded it. History, like the glass of Rana Bishara's *Blindfolded History*, an installation of silk-screened chocolate on 55 glass panels, can never be totally erased. Chocolate dissolves on the tongue, but its taste lingers

in memory. The paradox extends to these images of suffering, naked Palestinian boys held at gunpoint, grieving women, Israeli soldiers regressing to pre-moral states. At one point they were news, the larvae of history. Now they join the world of art, transformed.³

As art, this history was brought alive as well by the fact that you made an installation, not just a two-dimensional work. What effect were you hoping to create with this installation?

RB: Through *Blindfolded History*, I tried to freeze moments in history onto glass. This involved a bitter-



Figure 8a–b. Rana Bishara, *Blindfolded History* (2003–ongoing), fifty-five sheets of glass silk-screened with bitter chocolate: (a) general installation view, (b) close-up, overlapping view. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.



sweet juxtaposition that allowed them to transcend the status of media images to become valuable documents and icons. The media images were transformed from one reality into another, from the bitterness and sorrow of life to the truth of Palestinian suffering. Each time a viewer steps into the space, there is movement. An emotion is released in this space of frozen moments from the brutal realities of our history.

I wanted viewers to walk through narrow paths between the suspended artworks to get closer to the images and then become overwhelmed by the smell

of chocolate. The smell of chocolate and the fragility of the glass one has to maneuver through could give them something of the experience of walking through a minefield, reminding them of the instability and hidden aspects of Palestinian people's lives. Glass has a double meaning. It represents the fragility and transparency of the subjects shown in my artwork and the way images of events can deteriorate. But the glass also represents the media screen where historical facts and truths about Palestinian horror get manipulated and distorted. By appropriating these images in my artwork,

I lay their naked reality on glass, which allows an image to be seen from both sides. I wanted to contrast this to the way Western media shows only one side. These scenes weave into each other through transparent layers. And interestingly, because the images are on glass, the artwork reflects not just onto the other images but onto the walls of the museum space. The reflections sometimes even appeared green, the complementary color of the red bittersweet chocolate that symbolized their enjoyment of abusing us and our bitterness. To me, this green symbolized hope and truth.

LA-L: Some of your work is classically aesthetic, as the delicate watercolor painting you did of my father's gravestone in Jaffa that we will return to later in our conversation. Some recent work you showed me also strikes me as deliberately rejecting beauty. I don't mean refusing it in the way you have worked with violent materials like barbed wire or nails, which you have also used in a recent work when you mangled an elegantly smooth and rich wooden violin with barbed wire (fig. 9); I am thinking instead about your current obsession with white plastic restraining ties. You've woven gowns of these white plastic ties to wear as you marched in political demonstrations in Palestine and abroad like in Washington Square

Park in NYC in May 2018 (fig. 10). In that same year you created an eerily neon-lit hanging that looks almost like a coat of mail made out of these (see figs. 11–12). Tangled in the "weaving" and lying in a heap at the bottom are tiny, garish plastic toys. The work is cold. It triggers strong and jarring affects about childhood. Is the impetus for this work the arrests and detentions of so many Palestinian children?

RB: I displayed *Homage to Palestinian Children in Israeli Prisons* in March 2018 at a fundraising event with the Palestine Foundation in Los Angeles (figs. 11–12). I donated some artwork to be auctioned and did a performance and a public talk with poet and writer Sandy Tolan, along with Al-Kamandjati Ensemble, a music association in Ramallah that provides music lessons to children in Palestine. The artworks *Don't Play into Apartheid* (fig. 9) and *Hijacked Childhood*, including the performance, juxtapose children's innocence and fragility with their bitter reality under the cruelty of Israeli occupation. Children are trapped like the toys between handcuffs, their dreams suspended. The barbed wired violin for me represents the suppressed creativity under occupation and conditional support imposed on Palestinian cultural and human rights organizations by the



Figure 9. Rana Bishara, *Don't Play into Apartheid* (2018), violin and barbed wire. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

USA and the EU. Both force us to deny “terrorism” in order to get funding. This artwork was my way of raising my voice in support of the BDS movement (Boycott Divestments and Sanctions) as a form of civil resistance and against the imposition of any such conditions and limitations. Art and music have to be freely expressed and liberating for our nation.

Antonio Gramsci’s philosophy has had a strong effect on my life and my art. He writes, “The intellectual’s error consists in the belief that it is possible to know without understanding and above all without feeling or being passionate.”⁴ Intellectuals should not be detached from what he called the “people-nation.” I was inspired when I read the quote from Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*. The ongoing *Homage to Childhood*, a work from 2002, was an installation I did about the abuse and killing of children in general—and Palestinian children in particular. In this work, children appear trapped between halos made of barbed wire covered with tulle cloth and balloons. The balloons were filled with pictures of Palestinian children that I selected carefully from the UNRWA historic photographic archive. They were children who were killed or injured. Some are photographs of children hurt or killed post-1948 by Israeli Zionist gangs and settlers or the official occupation forces in charge. The spectator has to maneuver between the suspended barbed wire circles hanging from the ceiling. The balloons and a mattress were on the floor in the middle of the room. Spectators had to interact with the artwork by walking through the space and discovering the pictures inside the translucent balloons, or by lying down on the mattress and watching the barbed wire circles conquering the space. Tulle is typically used for veiling brides or children’s beds and so seems out of place in halos stretched across barbed wire. This was a meta-



Figure 10. Rana Bishara, performance, *Hijacked Childhood: Homage to Palestinian Children in Israeli Prisons* (2018), zip ties and toys, Washington Square Park, NY. Photo credit: Noelle Rolland.

phor of simultaneous protection and harm. Here were malevolent halos that crowned children, stealing their childhood even before they are born.

LA-L: Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian has used the term *unchilding* in her new book to capture this theft of Palestinian children’s childhoods by the violent practices of the Israeli security state.⁵ I think your earlier piece, *Besieged Childhood: Baby Bottle with Straight Pins for Gaza Children*, speaks to these issues, too (fig. 13).

RB: Yes, this piece was created as part of a series of artworks about the siege on Gaza, now fourteen years old.

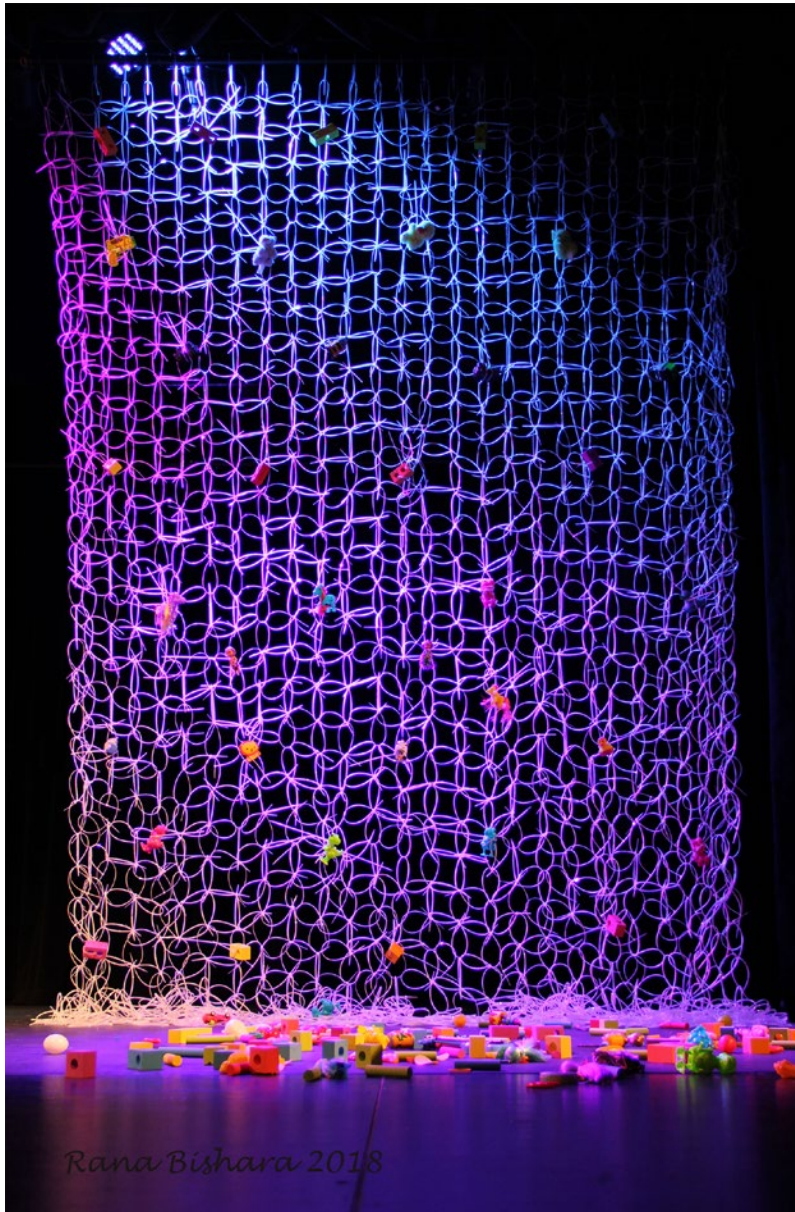


Figure 11. Rana Bishara, *Hijacked Childhood: Homage to Palestinian Children in Israeli Prisons* (2018), hanging Installation, 600 x 300 x 10 cm, zip ties and toys. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

The siege blocks access on the ground, from the sea, and from the air. It makes Gaza the biggest open-air prison in the world. It underwent three vicious wars in less than eight years—in 2008, 2012, and 2014. As a challenge to the occupiers and their allies, this artwork was enlarged and exhibited on a huge building facade in Gaza as part of a festival titled “Colors of Siege 2009.” A group of Palestinian artists from Gaza decided to break the siege through art. We were asked to send photographs of our art pieces to be printed in Gaza and hung all around the city. Through this plastic baby bottle, I wanted to convey the suffering the siege had inflicted through the poli-

cies of starving the population, as well as the denial of medical supplies, fuel, and clean water. In an article written in 2012, journalist Jonathan Cook noted that “six and a half years ago, shortly after Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections and took charge of Gaza, a senior Israeli official described Israel’s planned response. ‘The idea,’ he said, ‘is to put the Palestinians on a diet, but not to make them die of hunger.’”⁶ This is criminal. The collective punishment affects children and nursing mothers the most. It undermines the future. Because so many children and even babies have been killed or orphaned, I filled this baby bottle with pins instead of the milk that should have nourished them.

Another work I created was a 2015 piece, an abacus made with barbed wire, to comment on the political imprisonment of children and the kind of traumatic lives they lead under an Israeli occupation designed to criminalize them and destroy their innocence even before they begin their life and education (fig. 14). A million Palestinians have been arrested between 1967 and mid-June 2020 and more than 50,000 of them are children under the age of eighteen. Israel is the only country that tries children in mil-

itary court. We are talking about 500–700 tried each year, just in the last five years; from 2000 to September 2015, about 8,500 children have been sentenced for such “crimes” as throwing stones. Heavy fines are imposed on the children’s desperate families (between 1,000 and 6,000 Israeli shekels) and, according to reports of the Palestinian Commission of Detainees Affairs, the children are denied medical treatment and terrorized and dehumanized. The military courts became a means for blackmailing financially exhausted families and profiting by treating these children as adults. The Israeli occupation violates children’s rights and is illegal, and

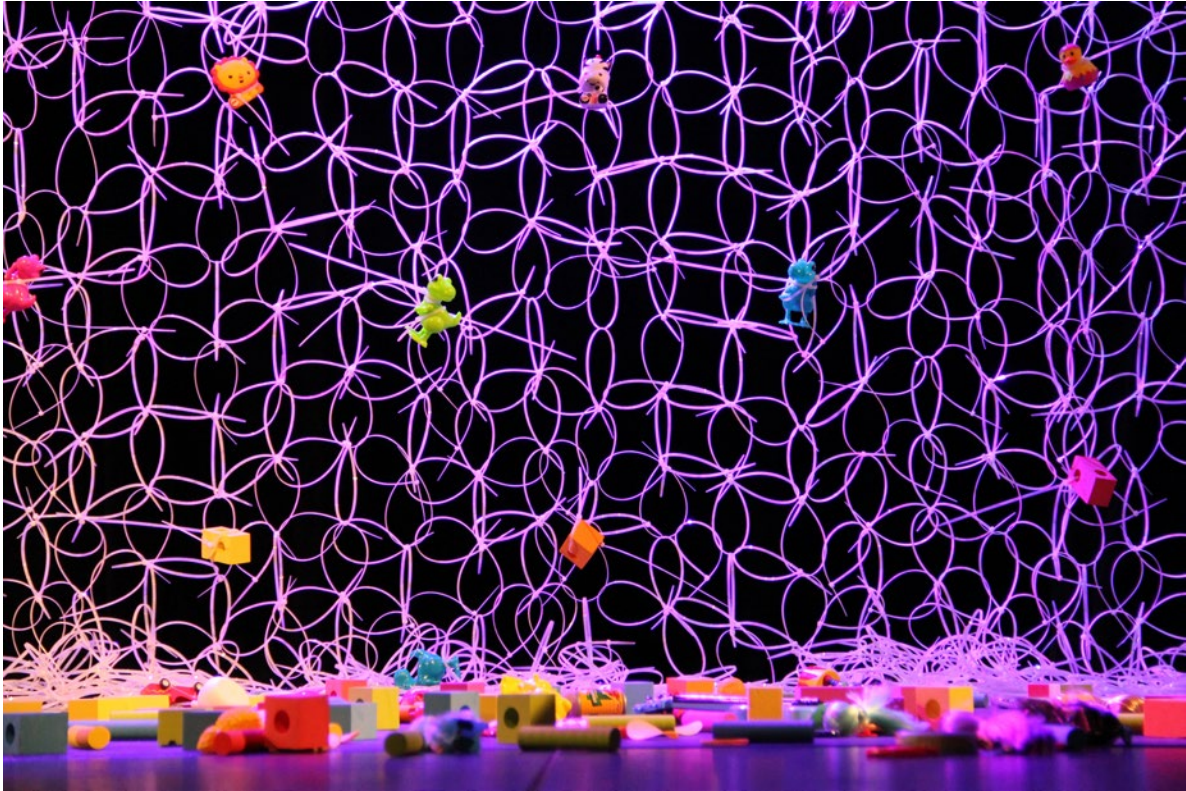


Figure 12. Rana Bishara, *Hijacked Childhood: Homage to Palestinian Children in Israeli Prisons* (2018), close-up. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

the situation threatens to worsen considerably with the COVID-19 pandemic.

LA-L: Some people consider political art to be a degraded form. I imagine you think very differently about the relationship between art and politics. Your latest installation was *The Road Map for Elimination*. It was created for the Palestinian Museum’s exhibit called “Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape” in 2019. Curated by Dr. Tina Sherwell from Birzeit University, the exhibit explored Palestinian artists’ connections to the land and landscape. It seems that while doing her PhD research on representations of the landscape in Palestinian art, Sherwell had been inspired by an exhilarating interdisciplinary international conference that my father, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, had organized with Birzeit University colleagues, November 12–15, 1998. Edward Said gave the keynote address “Landscape Perspectives on Palestine” and brought with him his colleague W. T. J. Mitchell, who had written an influential 1994 literary study called *Landscape and Power*. The book from the conference was published as *The Landscape of Palestine: Equivocal Poetry*. I was not surprised that you were invited to participate in the exhibit at the Palestinian Museum, the third it

had organized since it opened its doors in 2016.⁷ I was frustrated that I was unable to travel to Palestine to see the exhibit, but from the photographs of your installation I could see that some of your characteristic materials reappeared. Yet you also introduced some new elements prominently: maps and infographics. Did you write an artist statement about the work?

RB: Yes, I wrote about this work (fig. 15a–b) in my artist’s statement for the exhibition catalog for “Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape” at the Palestinian Museum, taking us back to the question of the landscape in which I grew up:

I took my very first steps in Palestine. It was in its hills, its mountains, and its plateaus that I walked; it was from the springs of its waters that I drank, and from its evening breeze that I breathed in the land’s splendor. Those were the features and sensations that built a notion of homeland within me. That is what constituted my visual memory of the place. Today I live the daily struggle between that which I remember, and that imposed upon me by the Israeli occupation.

That map of Palestine etched into our minds is now a cluster of fragments. Its geography is no geography, nor its nature natural. They occupied it at every level for



Figure 13. Rana Bishara, *Besieged Childhood: Baby Bottle with Straight Pins (Homage to Gaza Children)* (2009). Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

which there can be meaning, our freedom confiscated, our water now expropriated, our age-old ways of living with the earth demonized and denied. We were left to rot in ghettos, cantons, and camps, our lives themselves now hostage to the vagaries of the settler colony. Both that map of Palestine and those lived realities of our people are now untethered, like roving sand dunes left to follow the will and whimsy of the winds. They have been disfigured and distorted by Zionist colonies and settle-

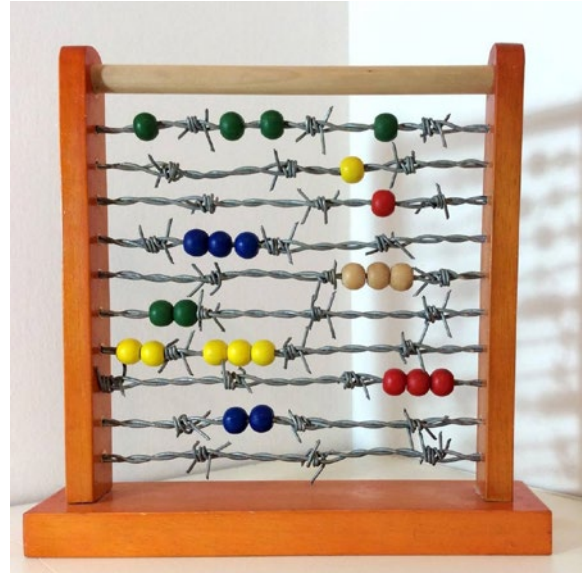


Figure 14. Rana Bishara, *Abacutheid* (2015), abacus with barbed wire and beads. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

ment blocs; military checkpoints that have become sites of arrest and execution; and the Great Wall of Apartheid.

The visual landscape is just as impossible. In Palestine, to look is to see only the decaying skeleton of a Palestine that once was, now grisly and grim, its flesh and soul torn apart by clusters of ghastly concrete and the cruelty of those settlers dwelling within.

I tried to demonstrate all this in the maps that cover the walls, floor, and ceiling of this room installation. The maps that show statistics on refugees and the loss of land and fragmentations of territories are taken from Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights and from OCHA (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs). The maps also demonstrate the geographic, and therefore, the social fragmentation and separation. Nothing resembles normal life. It is the status quo that the Oslo Accord legitimized, legitimizing the new Nakba that befell our people, land, and everything we own.

At the center of this work is the cactus, its desiccated fibers hanging from the ceiling. This thick and fleshy plant, wreathed as it is in thorns, is an integral part of the natural aesthetic of the Palestinian landscape. It was the cactus, that noble plant that separated gardens and fields from each other and protected people and crops from predators, that the cruel concrete came in to replace.

The slow motion of the shadows and reflections on the walls in this otherwise void and empty space, together with the slow rotation of the cactus wheel hanging from the ceiling, suggests the temporality of the game in which Palestinian life and struggle is being eradicated.

The map of Jerusalem, dating back to 1581, is at the center of the void. It reminds us that Jerusalem was at the center of the pre-modern world, the eternal capital of the pre-eradicated Palestinians. The green light emanating from the fresh green cactus represents the still-pulsating life force fueled by hope and a will to stand fast against the

ongoing ethnic cleansing that began seventy-two years ago, until freedom.

Seven decades have passed, and the skeleton of Palestine (what is left of historic Palestine) seems to be held together by little black threads, making it impossible to reunite Palestinians in this bitter reality and as our refugees are being displaced from one place to another.⁸



LA-L: This is very powerful. It could be a good place to end our interview, except that I want to ask you about one more dimension of your work. I know that you don't just want your artwork to hang in galleries. You want to engage communities at home, both in the West Bank and in '48 Palestine where your family is from. Could you talk about some of these performance pieces?

RB: How did I develop my own form of self-expression—maybe we could call it my own genre of combining art and activism? There were two key turning points in my life that led to my move to combine the two through performances and other mediums. The first was in 2001 when I moved to the US to study for my MFA. It was in the middle of the second intifada. So many things were changing in my personal life and in my homeland, and it was challenging to be far away, especially after 9/11. I was even interrogated by the FBI after the Patriot Act. They came to my studio in New York! During the years of my MFA studies, I developed new modes of expression, philosophies, perspectives on life that led me toward expressing this through my art. My research there gave me the opportunity and the time

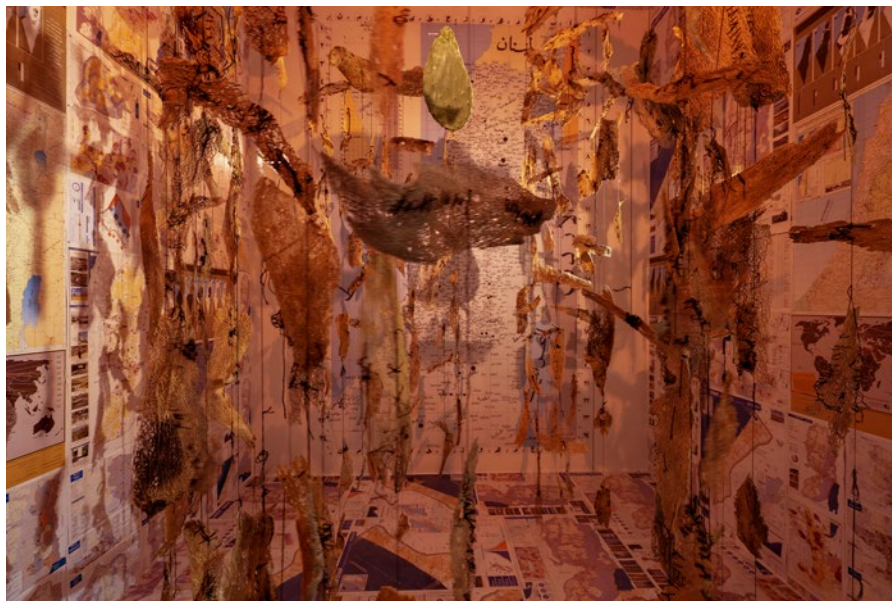


Figure 15a–b. Rana Bishara, *The Road Map for Elimination* (2006–ongoing), room installation, 240 × 400 × 400 cm, Palestinian Museum, 2019–20, OCHA and Badil maps, dried and green cactus, black threads, and mobile: (a) vertical view, (b) detail. Photo credit: (a) Rana Bishara, (b) Hareth Yousef for The Palestinian Museum.

to express myself in words as well. This is important to me as an artist.

It took a while to turn my despair into art that I hoped would be able to help in some way. The second turning point was when I returned from the US and decided to move from the Galilee in historic Palestine, where I had grown up, to live instead in Jerusalem and then the West Bank. During the first phase, as we talked about in relation to *Blindfolded History*, I had to leave Palestine just as the second intifada started and so had to witness it from a distance. But the second phase was an even bigger challenge. I had to live under direct occupation in Jerusalem and then in the West Bank, where the occupation is even more immediate and visible. That intensity and those experiences affected my art. My early work in the 1990s had been mostly painting, printmaking, and photography. Then in the mid-1990s, I began experimenting with installation art and 3D work. I started to see the importance of space and to think that art could take us to a different, more conceptual understanding of the limits that I had lived with all my life, as a Palestinian under occupation.

When I relocated from the Galilee to Jerusalem and the West Bank, I had to deal with issues in daily life that gave me a different perspective. My personal life became marginal. My focus turned toward urgent issues going on in the community and in the streets. The socioeconomic and political issues people were facing made me feel that I had a responsibility, even a duty, to express these everyday absurdities in my art. Since 2005, I have been looking for different media for this, ones that could be more visible and accessible to our people. I start from their suffering and their everyday lives, and I want my art to support them.

I became more and more involved in the political situation and the ongoing escalation and hostility. I found this stressful because even my body was involved in the activism of daily life because I cared. I was going to demonstrations, to funerals, and to court hearings where I helped translate, and for a while I was teaching art under tough circumstances at Al Quds University in Jerusalem, where I also headed the art department from 2009 to 2011. Somehow I managed to direct my students in their final graduation projects as they grappled with some of the serious issues they were facing. Especially in 2015 I was visiting martyrs' families, attending funerals, and standing with the young people who had lost their loved ones. What I witnessed in those years in Jerusalem and the West Bank opened my eyes to so much—abuse,

killing, and more. In less than four years I marched in five out of seven funerals of young Palestinian martyrs in Dheisha refugee camp. The oldest was twenty-seven years old, Moatz Zawahra, and the youngest, Arkan Mizher, was only fourteen years old. Seven months later his cousin, a sixteen-year-old volunteer paramedic, Sajid Mizher, was killed as well. They were killed in cold blood and no one was held accountable for those war crimes. How can one take such tragedies and remain silent? It made me more sensitive and rather more distressed to learn how the occupation works with such savagery, committing such atrocities especially in refugee camps and easily gets away with it. I insist on resisting this through my art, and it ended up being through performance because I was already involved and in the field. How could I express this visually, emotionally, and conceptually to convey messages about what I was seeing, while staying true to my cause and our nation?

Land confiscation, the uprooting of olive trees and destruction of olive groves, attacks on farmers on their land, the banning of people from access to their land to harvest their crops, the imprisoning of children and adults, solidarity tents for hunger strikers . . . I remember that every day in 2006 or 2007 I gathered my courage and dashed into the street to find myself marching in crowds and chanting for the freedom of prisoners in Jerusalem. I was covered with a white woven plastic gown with black dots symbolizing the Palestinian kufiyya, made from the zip ties used as handcuffs by Israeli Occupation Forces while making arrests. My interaction with the crowds and the people's reaction to what I was wearing gave me the courage to continue. Some spoke up about their pain the moment they saw this strange-looking gown. They asked questions and when they comprehended the concept, they loved it and told me I was speaking up on their behalf. But not everyone liked it. One woman started shouting at me, accusing me of wanting to steal attention from the mothers of the prisoners. I decided not to react, but such experiences show that you are dealing with much more than art when you do these performances in public.

I believe that artists are integral to changing society. Artists should care and be present. They should be involved, and to be involved for Palestinians is to respond to the urgency of the occupation, and to stay true to yourself and your cause. As Bassel al Araji, the thirty-one-year-old martyr who was killed in cold blood by Israeli occupation forces in 2017, said, "If you want to be an intellectual, you'd better be an engaged one."

For that we need to find unconventional ways to make art and be involved and active. I would go out into the streets because I wanted to be among my people in their daily struggles. But the more urgent I felt this was, the more frustrating it became sometimes. It also meant setting aside other aspects of my life as an artist—including making a living and giving myself the stability that makes possible my artmaking. It has been tough as the situation has deteriorated. The COVID-19 crisis has made it even more impossible to survive financially. I finally decided I had to move back to Tarshiha for a break.

Since Palestine does not have many museums and the culture of visiting museums is uncommon anyway—and most art galleries are commercial and most people don't have time or access because of the complex reality under occupation—I had decided to bring my art to the streets. I am more and more convinced that the visual affects us deeply. It is food for the eye and can also motivate people toward freedom and prosperity. I found that performances, both locally and abroad, seem to affect audiences in ways that provoke them to think and feel and revolt. The power of art is that it is an international language, and we can make it easier for people to sympathize on a political level if we can make it personal.

I feel good that I have been invited to take some of these performance pieces abroad because they bring attention to the issues Palestinians are facing. At the Leeds City Gallery in 2000 and later in the Hague and Paris, I worked with loaves of bread. In "Bread for Palestine" I sewed loaves of bread to create piggy banks stuffed with cotton wool, as if the Israelis wanted Gazans to beg for food and forget the root cause of their suffering. I wanted to convey the problem of the lack of food under the siege of Gaza, just as I would fill the plastic baby bottle with metal pins. In 2019, I even combined loaves of bread with the plastic restraining ties that I've been working with for the last few years. At the Humanity Festival in Paris as well as a March of Return in Palestine, I carried what I called a "Homeless Pillow." I fitted wooden crosses with sound bombs and gas canisters for the Bethlehem marathon and the tenth anniversary in Bil'in of the demonstrations resisting the apartheid wall.

One of the performances I've done both locally and abroad is called the Zaatar and Zeit Communion/Ritual. I've performed this since 2006. It starts from the idea that "In times of siege and segregation, I give you food." In an artist statement from when I performed it in Paris, I wrote,

This ritual is about dignity, about the aroma and taste of Palestine, a nation that has been dismissed and forgotten for too long, a nation left behind in the big bubble of the international community. Fourteen years of siege by Israeli colonial occupation have passed and the people of Gaza are still suffering from the starvation policy and from preventing people from traveling for medical treatment and study in Egypt, Israel, or abroad. Generations have been put on hold. Children suffer from malnutrition. Can they even imagine another world where their lives are valued and respected by those who hold power?

Zaatar means wild thyme. Added to this is sesame and sumac and salt and olive oil. We eat zaatar with zeit zaytoon, our treasured olive oil: our heritage and our wealth. All of this agricultural heritage is under threat. Our lands are being confiscated and olive trees being uprooted and moved to the Jewish settlements. They are being burned and vandalized. Our native plants such as zaatar are being uprooted and replaced with settlements and walls. Even in my family village, like everywhere in Palestine, we are being banned from picking zaatar. But still, people pick zaatar even though they risk fines to do so. All that is to tear us all away from our beloved land make us feel desperate and leave.

Zeit and Zaatar are the flesh and blood of historic Palestine. This communion/ritual expresses our closeness to the land and the sacredness of our land, not only to Christians, but to all Palestinians who cherish it. We take this "communion" also to remember the sacrifice of all of those who have sacrificed themselves for justice in Palestine, as they seek real freedom and peace for everyone. We are full of dignity, and we need no mercy but the mercy of true freedom! Our ancestors lived and survived out of this sacred and fertile land and as our great poet Mahmoud Darwish said, "We have on this land that which makes life worth living." We and our new generations will continue living and surviving and hopefully under freedom soon after a long history of one hundred and three years set in motion by the Balfour declaration.¹⁰

LA-L: I'd like to end by asking you about a theme that has been driving some of your recent performance pieces. This is the question of return. We first met in New York just after you finished your MFA. A friend and colleague, Aseel Sawalha, mentioned to me that she had seen a painting dedicated to my father in an exhibit. It was about his burial in Jaffa in 2001. I found a way to meet you then. Could you talk about your current work that seems to have to do with the return of exiled Palestinians like my father?

RB: I've been very concerned with memory and return, and I do think that your father started me on this path. I remember him pointing to the Palestinian coast from his temporary Ramallah home, with Yafa/Jaffa, his home city, visible on the horizon. I considered him a mentor and idol before I left for the US to study. He always used to ask me, as he pointed, "Do you see Yafa?" I also remember him saying every time we ate zaatar together, "Any Palestinian household that has no zaatar in it is not a true Palestinian home." This was the food at the center of the Zaatar and Zeit Communion/Ritual piece we just talked about.

I was moved by what Edward Said said about your father in his elegy. He called him "Palestine's foremost academic and intellectual" and described him as someone who had been longing for his return to Palestine after being in the US for a long time, and someone hoping to return to live the rest of his life in Yafa. This to me is about his right to return, like millions of Palestinians in exile. Unfortunately, he fell ill and died on May 23, 2001, at the age of seventy-two, without having been able to exercise his right to return to Yafa. But I knew at the time that his family had insisted on burying him in Yafa and went through a complicated process in the days following his death. It was clear that the Israeli occupation didn't want to set a legal precedent for return.

I remember that day when I marched in his funeral procession in Yafa. I was feeling the heavy loss and sadness but also a sense of victory. We were implementing his will to return! I tried to express my feelings about this experience through a couple of watercolor paintings later. In the painting that led to our meeting in New York and my getting to know the whole family, I tried to paint the horizon that he was always pointing to. It was a painting of a simple grave overlooking the sea (see fig. 16). That is where the old Yafa cemetery is, in Ajami. I felt that his soul now rested in peace in his home city where his ancestors had lived. He and his family had been exiled in the 1948 Nakba, but he had succeeded in returning there. But only after death. Still, in this watercolor painting I also used tar. I like to use unconventional, harsh materials to reflect daily reality. Tar is a thick, dark, and smelly medium, and I intensified my use of it in 2002–3 when I dedicated a series of artworks to the Jenin massacre, mixing tar with oil paints then.

Your father influenced my art in other ways. Memory has played a big role in my art, and I remember

he was always talking then about creating a "Memory Museum."

LA-L: Yes, this idea was the beginning of what would eventually be created as the Palestinian Museum, where you exhibited that installation we just talked about, *The Road Map for Elimination*.

RB: Our conversations about memory and then his burial in Yafa led me to want to pay tribute to all those of our people who, like your father, lived all of their lives longing to return. I vowed, as homage to those who have been deprived of the right to live normally in their homeland and had spent their lives as refugees or in the diaspora, that I would try to bring about their return. Since I am an artist not a lawyer, I am doing this symbolically until it becomes a reality.

I started with Naji Al-Ali, the writer, artist, and political cartoonist who was born in 1938 and assassinated in 1987 and buried in London. I think he was prophetic, predicting so much of what has happened over the thirty-three years since he died. I wanted these exiles' souls to rest in peace on Palestinian soil, at least until liberation. These ritual performances I am creating also connect me to my grandmothers in a special way because I know that my paternal grandmother bravely came back to our village, with my father and his sisters and brothers. Otherwise, we would have all ended up in exile or living like the millions who are still in refugee camps.

In 2015 I created a site-specific performance/ritual of return for Naji Al-Ali. It started in London and moved to Al-Shajara, a destroyed village that was his birthplace in Palestine. This was a spiritual tribute to his soul and the character he created and made famous as a symbol of Palestine and justice more broadly—for Palestine but also Egypt, Vietnam, and South Africa. This character was called Handala, who became the signature of Naji al-Ali's cartoons and remains an iconic symbol of Palestinian identity and defiance. The ten-year-old represented Al-Ali's age when forced to leave Palestine and would not grow up until he could return to his homeland. Handala had been my soul mate as a child. Handala's posture with his back turned and his hands clasped behind him symbolized, according to Naji, the character's rejection of everything that was going on. Handala's ragged clothes and bare feet connect him to the poor. His spiky hair might be seen as his weapon to defend himself, like the prickly cactus that I work with so often.



Figure 16. Rana Bishara, *Abu-Lughod Resting in Yafa* (2002), watercolor and tar on paper, 50 x 65 cm. Photo credit: Rana Bishara.

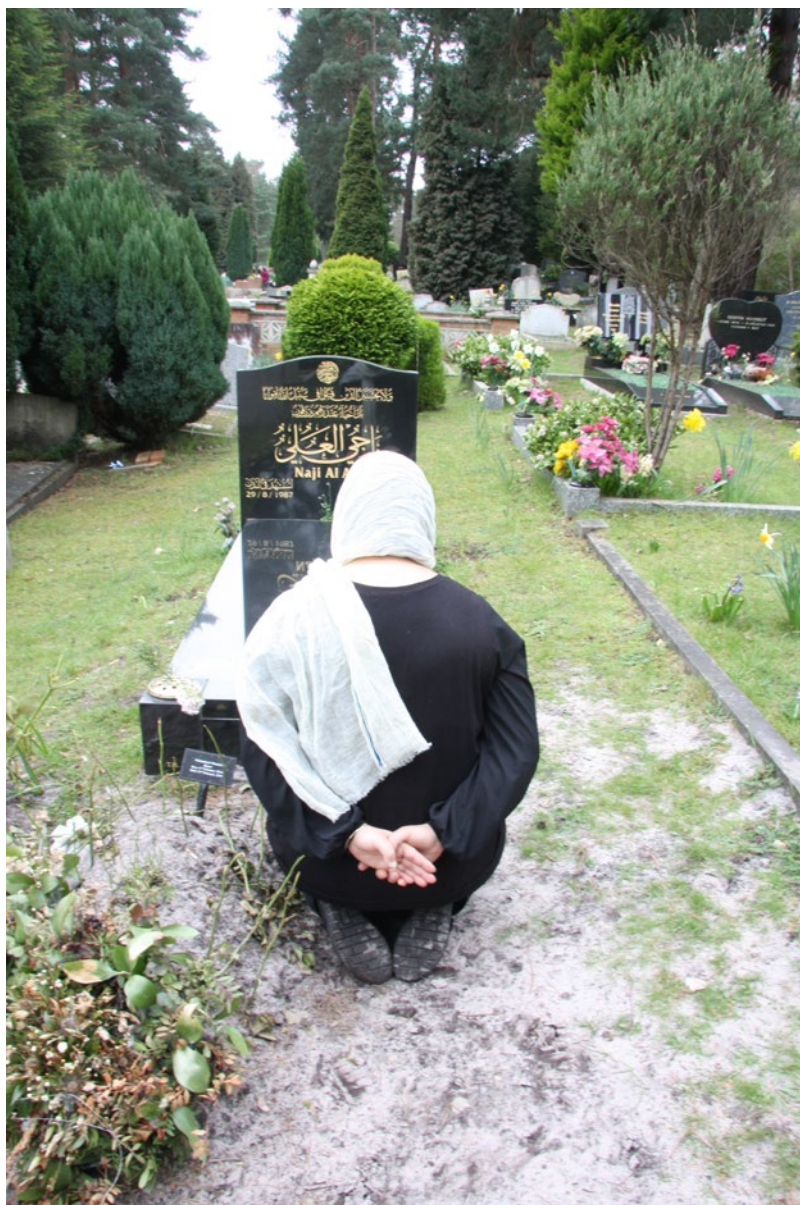


Figure 17. Bishara as Handala at Naji Al-Ali's grave, 2014. Photo credit: ©Neville Rigby/Druimarts.

So I visited Naji Al-Ali's grave at Glades House, Cemetery Pales, in Brookwood, UK. As part of my homage, I imitated Handala's posture, but on my knees (fig. 17). Then I took a rubbing of his gravestone, using graphite on a symbolic shroud made of a traditional white Jerusalem fabric (fig. 18). I took this "shroud" back with me to Palestine with the idea of creating a ritual that would symbolically return the shroud home, a temporary measure until the return of all the generations whose rights had been stolen from them over what has now become seven decades.

I also wanted to bring people together to remember and pay their respects to their loved ones who were buried in exile. So this was about memory, the idea I shared with your father. I arranged the event at Al Sajara, a demolished and depopulated Palestinian village, one of 531. I arrived early with some friends that day and gathered stones from the field. They seemed to be from demolished homes because they were near the cactus and olive trees that were still standing. With the stones I created a symbolic grave of exactly the same dimensions as Naji's grave in London.

I had invited the families originally from this village and other people from other villages and insisted that an elderly person and a child should be among us. I wanted the torch to be passed from the older generation to a younger one. I wanted to revive the idea of return and turn it into reality, after seven decades of exile and suffering. This was especially important for children, who, like Handala, represent the future of Palestine. I know how they are targeted by the state, with the ultimate goal of making them forget. As the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben-Gurion, famously said, as he dismissed

the violence of the expulsions and takeover of Palestine, "The old will die and the young will forget."

The torch I wanted passed on in this case was a bundle that included the "shroud," an olive branch, and an olive-wood Handala to an old woman originally from this village. After the bundle was passed on, we all went to the symbolic grave that we had set up under the oldest tree there. I and the oldest man from the village laid down the shroud on the grave. I handed the olive wood Handala to the youngest girl to put on the grave. And then I myself put the olive branch on the top, after



Figure 18. Bishara at Naji Al-Ali's grave, rubbing the gravestone with graphite on fabric, 2014. Photo credit: ©Neville Rigby/Druimarts.

kneeling and paying my respects the exact same way I had done in London. I brought the shroud back to its original birthplace because I believe that for the soul to rest in peace, it has to be back home on Palestinian soil (see fig. 19).

LA-L: This reminds me of the work of women activists and artists around the world who have been memorializing through performances and vigils political violences of the past—including torture and disappearances—with the goal of bringing out hidden or erased stories. A recent book from a multiyear project led by my colleagues Marianne Hirsch and Jean Howard documents and analyzes many of these creative practices, focusing particularly on Turkey and Chile. It is called *Women Mobilizing Memory*, and I think you would find it worth reading. Are these memory performances politically effective? What was the reaction to this ritual performance of yours?

RB: Thanks for suggesting this book to me. I am definitely going to read it since I strongly believe in the power of women to mobilize politically in their own

ways but especially because of their perspectives on feminism, intellectualism, and art. I look up to Samia Halaby and Marina Abramovic. The reaction of my friends who attended the event was amazing and very touching despite the challenges. But it was also traumatic because of how we were confronted. After my friends and I had collected the stones from the rubble of the old houses and were starting to build the “grave,” I noticed some youngsters driving motorbikes around us, kicking up dust and shattering the peace of the place with the noise. We decided not to pay them any attention in the hope that they would leave. But they kept coming back and disturbing us. We continued even though they were cursing and badmouthing us. I realized they were doing this on purpose. As we were starting the spiritual part of the ritual that needed quiet and concentration, suddenly a big group carrying Israeli flags appeared and starting shouting and attacking us with their dogs, aggressively singing Zionist national songs and calling us names with hateful expressions. They were settlers (see fig. 20).

They kept going and one man even sent his dog to attack me when I was paying respects next to the sym-



Figure 19. Bishara at Naji Al-Ali ritual, 2015. Photo credit: Fadi Amirah Photography.

bolic grave. I really felt threatened by him. The group was now also attacking the other participants. Imagine how you would feel with this dog directed by its owner to attack you. I gathered my power, faced the dog, and hit him with my hand, trying to get him away before he could attack us. Our group stood up and defended all the participants and the “grave” so that we could continue the ritual. Just as we were resuming it, the police and border police arrived on the scene. They asked us to leave the place and asked five of us for our ID cards, right in the middle of the ritual as we were placing the fabric on the “grave.” We were chanting “Mawtini mawtini” (my country my country) and singing other patriotic songs. We sat on the ground and refused to leave.

When they insisted that we show them our ID cards, I explained that we were in the middle of an art performance and they should respect that. I told the police, “Here is my ID. You can take it and once I am finished I will come with you.” The policeman didn’t like it, of course, and became very aggressive, siding with the settlers from the kibbutz. We did manage to complete the ritual by applying the fabric on the “grave,” but we rushed through it because their attack on us was frightening. In fact, the settlers came closer and closer and started tearing down the stones of the “grave” under the protection of the Israeli police and border police. Just imagine: all this while the participants and their children were all there! But we remained strong and stood together to resist this. But then the police started arresting people from the crowd. They used their two police cars to block the settlers from coming closer to the grave, but then they approached me again when I was giving an interview to journalists covering the event (fig. 21). They arrested me along with four male friends. They drove us to the Tayberia police station for

interrogation. The rest of the participants were forced to leave and the children who were with us were so scared, crying. I was forced to leave everything behind and was shoved into the police car. But I managed to save the “shroud” by handing it to a friend. At least it hadn’t been confiscated.

The five of us arrested were detained for over five hours of hostile interrogation. The provocative questions were strange, and we had no clear idea why we had been arrested. Friends had followed us to the detention center/police station and were demonstrating outside. Some were lawyers and volunteered to defend us for free, and they phoned other lawyers for help. I refused to answer any questions until my lawyer, Suhad Bishara,



Figure 20. Bishara and participants threatened by settlers, Israeli occupation police, and border police, 2015. Photo credit: Fadi Amirah Photography.



Figure 21. Police cars at the scene and Bishara being interviewed by journalist Wael Awwad, 2015. Photo credit: Fadi Amirah Photography.

from Adala came. You know her, I think, because she was a law fellow at the Center for Palestine Studies at Columbia a few years ago.

LA-L: So what kinds of questions were they asking in your interrogation?

RB: When I was asking my interrogators why we had been detained they couldn't answer. But finally they gave the excuse that it was an illegal demonstration. But I had a very interesting encounter with one of my interrogators. It turned out that he was an Arab Jew from Morocco. One of the questions he asked me was, "Where are you from?" I answered that I was from Tarshiha. He said "Aha, Maalot Tarshiha." I said "No, Maalot is a settlement occupying my village and there is big difference." He kept asking, "Why did you come here and why did you arrange this without a permit? And who is this person you are talking about?" I explained that it was Naji Al-Ali, who was assassinated in London, and I was doing this to pay tribute to his soul. "Why here?," he asked. I told him he was exiled from here for you to come from Morocco and settle on our land! Then I asked him, "Where are you from?" His answer was smart and provocative. "I am from Bisan," pronouncing it in Arabic. Then he explained that this means "Gate to Heaven." I smiled and said, "But Bisan is very hot in the summer and it is like hell!"

So he kept coming back to his same question: "Why did you come to this kibbutz? To provoke people here and force them to leave?" I said we hadn't disturbed anybody. We were coming to our ancestors' land and we had the right to do so. He was very angry and tried a new tack. That is when I said I was curious about where he came from. When he finally said Morocco, I asked, "Don't you go to Morocco to visit your grandfather's grave?" He said of course. I said I was doing the same, and that Naji Al-Ali is like my grandfather, but also my idol. "I am coming to pay respect to his soul because he is not buried here in his own land. His body is longing for the soil of his birthplace so it can rest in peace. Exactly like your father or grandfather who are buried in their own homeland. This is where he belongs."

After two hours with this guy, they brought in another interrogator who asked the same questions to provoke me. He then said I had to sign a pledge not to enter the kibbutz for a week. After some negotiations with my lawyer, because I didn't want to sign, she said it was preferable to staying a night or two in detention and if I didn't sign, they would take me to court. I was unhappy but signed this silly pledge so that I could go home with

the friends who had supported me in carrying out this ritual for Naji's soul. I decided to keep this art project going and a few months later, I went to Amman and did another rubbing of the grave of another important figure in the Palestinian history of struggle for freedom. I plan to keep doing this for as long as Palestine is not free.

Lila Abu-Lughod is the Joseph L. Bottenwieser Professor of Social Science at Columbia University, where she teaches anthropology and gender studies and is affiliated with the Center for Palestine Studies. She writes on sentiment, poetry, media, and nationalism, and her most recent book is *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Harvard University Press, 2013). Her scholarship on Palestine focuses on memory, archives, museums, and cultural politics, beginning with a book she co-edited with Ahmad H. Sa'di, *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

Rana Bishara is a Palestinian installation artist, painter, graphic artist, photographer, performing artist, and sculptor. Born (in 1971) and raised in the village of Tarshiha in the Galilee in northern Palestine, she received a bachelor's degree in fine arts and women's studies from Haifa University in 1993 and completed her MFA on a Fulbright Scholarship at the Savannah College of Art and Design in 2003. She headed the art department at Al Quds University in Jerusalem from 2009 to 2011 and has been an art instructor at Dar Al-Kalima University College in Bethlehem for over fifteen years. Bishara's artwork has been exhibited widely in solo and group shows, both locally and internationally. She has had art residencies and exhibitions in Canada, France, the USA, Morocco, Jordan, and Jerusalem, and her artworks are held in museums, galleries, and major private collections of Palestinian art.

Notes

This interview was conducted on October 17, 2020.

1. Maher Al-Akhras was released on November 6, 2020, after 104 days. He began his hunger strike on July 27, 2020.
2. The book is available online via Nakba Commemoration Initiative Ottawa Facebook group, May 20, 2020, www.facebook.com/110667653880542/photos/a.115907303356577/138886807725293/.
3. See the catalog for the exhibit: Station Museum, *Made in Palestine*, 19.
4. Gramsci, quoted in Zene, *The Political Philosophies*, 214.
5. Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Incarcerated Childhood*.
6. Cook, "Israel's Starvation Diet for Gaza."

7. See Abu-Lughod, Heacock, and Nashef, *The Landscape of Palestine*. For more on the Palestinian Museum's history, see L. Abu-Lughod, "Imagining Palestine's Alter-Natives."

8. Rana Bishara, artist's statement on *The Road Map for Elimination*, 2006–ongoing, exhibition catalog for "Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape," Palestinian Museum, Birzeit, April–December 2019, 148–51.

9. Eid, "From Gaza."

10. Rana Bishara, artist's statement for performance at a solo exhibition, Galerie Municipale Julio Gonzalez, 2007, Arcueil, France.

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