A Call to Preserve Memory Through a Future Gaze

How is Palestine represented in contemporary art, and how do Palestinian artists deal with the notions of memory and the past? Larissa Sansour raises in her work many questions concerning ideas of sanctity, homeland, and memory, in a manner that helps turning them into an illusion. In an analytical review and an in-depth critical gaze, scholar Housni Alkhateeb Shehada presents a broad picture of the place, the dialogue, the memory, and the conflict the figures are experiencing in the work recently presented by Sansour, in the Danish Pavilion, at the 58th Venice Biennale.

Essay / Housni Shehada March 19, 2020

Probing the memory of a people is not a game, and certainly not something any artist, however creative, might easily achieve, particularly in the genre chosen by Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour.

Sansour (b. 1973) is a Palestinian artist living in London. In her film *In Vitro*, which has been part of her exhibition "Heirloom" in the Danish Pavilion of the 58th Venice Biennale, she rummages through memory using several artistic elements, including her script, the cinematography, and the production – the result of a long-term collaboration with the Danish artist Søren Lind. Sansour's film offers a unique and subjective experience in the field of Palestinian art, which has recently been attempting to break out of its local shell and reach the international arena. This approach makes it possible for Palestinian artists, wherever they might be, to create works that combine personal experiences with representation of the complex Palestinian reality, despite their difficulty in finding institutions to sponsor them, and the absence of a Palestinian state or government that might have provided support for artistic and cultural projects.

The exhibition - which includes a space for a two-channel film projection and another hall with an installation accompanied by sound – surprised me during my last year’s visit to Venice's Giardini (exhibition gardens). This section of Venice contains pavilions belonging to countries that had been able to build them there by right of the historical primacy of their independence. For that reason, there is no pavilion in the Giardini representing an independent Arab state, except for the Arab Republic of Egypt. And perhaps it is not purely by chance that Israel has won the right to erect a pavilion in a central area, close to many European states and adjacent to the American pavilion, since the United States made a gift to the young state of the tract of land in the 1950s, even though the time when countries could still build new structures in this part of the Giardini was over.

Before I return to my presentation and analysis of Sansour's film, I'd like to mention that Ralph Rugoff, the chief curator of the recent Biennale, has chosen to show in the main exhibition a selection from the unique photographic works of the Palestinian artist from Jerusalem, Rula Halawani, among 79 other artists from around the world. We will discuss her work in a separate article.1

In Vitro_2-channel black and white film_2019_7 sma.jpg



[1]Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, In Vitro, black-and-white two-channel film, 27 min and 44 sec., 2019
Courtesy of the artist

FG_G_Danimarca_6997 smakll.jpg **[2]**



[3]Larissa Sansour, installation view of Heirloom, Danish Pavilion, Venice, 2019
Photography: Francesco Galli, courtesy of the Venice Biennale

Sansour's experience is unique. Her current work abandons many of the axioms embedded in Western consciousness regarding Palestine and its people, lands, and art. Quietly, without fuss, away from politicians who cry out in various artistic forums about the long-term political struggle, we discover this film, in a room devoid of any allusions to Palestine, the Israeli occupation, or other Arab conflicts. We come into the exhibition hall in the Danish Pavilion, to a projection of a film on two large screens. The audience is sitting or standing, watching two women converse in spoken Arabic, the like of which might be heard in the streets of Nazareth. Sometimes the language creates a sense of nostalgia to the holy cities of Palestine (Jerusalem, Nazareth, Bethlehem), and sometimes – due to the sequence of scenes that show a catastrophe that had occurred in the past – the viewer can imagine that this is the language heard in one of the cities occupied in 1948, such as Haifa (حيفا), Lod (اللد), Acre (عكا), Ramla (الرملة), and Ashkelon (عسقلان). A dialogue takes place, about 30 minutes long, between an older woman on her deathbed and a young girl who has come to slake her thirst. Their dialogue begins at this less than optimistic point. It is a dialogue about memory: memory of things and the homeland, of the erratic human spirit that had experienced displacement, uprooting, and escape in search of a haven, and then ended up nowhere. That 'nowhere' is a central theme in the film, being represented as an underground ''test tube'' of reinforced concrete, as cold as the rest of the elements in the emotionless structure, which exists as an antithesis to the dialogue between the two protagonists.

The film does not grant even a moment of distraction or stepping off the trail. The dialogue is interesting and emotional, as the large screen fills with two figures possessing a breathtaking presence. The actress Hiam Abbass is amazing. She is pale, barely able to speak as she lies on her deathbed. Her words depart from her mouth like stones hurled at the viewer, leaving marks. The camera focuses on her face and lips in a close-up as she speaks out and expresses her opinion, or stares at the young woman. She speaks of a memory that is fading after her long years of captivity

in the underground gray concrete ''test tube''. She is depicted in black-and-white, which enhances the sense of alienation.

She recalls the house, the olive harvest, and the peaceful town in the times before the cataclysm, the awful environmental catastrophe that brought about the destruction of the city and its inhabitants, buildings, neighborhoods, streets, houses of prayer, and orchards. The residents escaped, we do not know where to, or if they even survived. The artist is attempting to form the memory through a description of what has been in the near past. This description is transmitted to the viewer through archive images embedded in the film.

The place: a deep cellar, which has withstood the destruction on the ground above. It was set up by a woman named Dunia (played by Hiam Abbass), who managed to carry with her several genes, re-engineered into new organisms so that they might recreate the past. The film follows science-fiction movies – an abandoned nuclear plant in the biblical town of Bethlehem turns into a giant orchard. A group of scientists is planning to re-plant in the soil above heirloom seeds and genes, collected in the last days before the end of the world, and then to re-emerge into the old world.

Most of the scenes in the film take place in the underground hospital ward, where the dialogue between Dunia, the dying founder of the orchard, and young Alia (the actress Maisa Abd Elhadi) who had come to nurse her. Alia, who was born below-ground, has not experienced life outside the ''test tube'', which is protected from the outcome of the catastrophe. She is like a creature born of a wide-ranging cloning program. She has never seen the town that is about to rise from the seeds Dunia brought along

These two women are the only characters in the film, except for a brief sequence of pictures from the memories of a child, Dunia's daughter, who has not survived the catastrophe. At first, we do not know what the connection between Dunia and Alia is, but slowly we begin to realize their complicated relationship. Alia is the only person left in this future world to succeed in preserving and containing the genes of the memories passed on by the dying older woman.

The film wants us to envision an imaginary future world, inspired by science-fiction movies. But the film and all of its components constitute an artistic tool used to challenge and stimulate the viewers' memory, to remind them of the things that happened in reality. The artist attempts to break out of the shell of realistic art and the conventional-historical narrative to describe Palestine's situation as a sort of science fiction. She weaves irony into the film, something that has been taking up more and more space in her recent works. In an interview (2014) she says that she has used humor in her early production, but her latest works have gradually shed the light aspect and acquired more and more irony, though they still contain all kinds of layers. It takes courage to create art in this vein, especially given Sansour's sensitive situation, as a Palestinian artist living in exile. According to her, she would always prefer to work in the space between utopia and dystopia.[2]

The conversation between the two figures soon develops into a passionate argument about the meaning of memory, diaspora, and nostalgia. One of the central topics is the tangled connection between past, present, and future. Wrecked Bethlehem provides a changed background. We see the various ways of moving through the underground ''test tube'' beneath the city: tunnels, twisting paths, and endless stairs. The building is constructed from reinforced concrete, bringing to mind both eradication and building. It reminds us of the devastation that has taken place and of the attempt to preserve life following all that destruction. It is the complete opposite of the historic stone houses we see in the film, from the days before the catastrophe. These houses display attributes of the Palestinian home and its aesthetics – such as using stone as construction material, arches, triangular stained-glass windows, a central hall open to natural light, jasmine and roses, painted tiles, simple children's toys. All these are symbols the artist weaves into her work to give voice to the history that Dunia seeks to preserve in Alia's cloned body. Even the lovely nature sights, such as the olive harvest, which have all become cells of memory, had been cloned and kept safe below the ground following the total ecological disaster.

FG_G_Danimarca_6952 small.jpg **[4]**



[5]Larissa Sansour, installation view of Heirloom, Danish Pavilion, Venice, 2019
Photography: Francesco Galli, courtesy of the Venice Biennale

I don't know how successful Sansour has been, in this film that includes many images from the Palestinian archive, in giving back the viewer some of the memory the young girl is trying to erase from what's left of her consciousness; it is an implanted memory, not created from events she has experienced. In her dialogue with the older woman (mother-memory), she repeats sentences that could help her to locate the memory in a remote place in her mind. She says she does not know whether what she remembers now, in the ''test tube'', is a product of lived experiences, in reality, or if they are imagined notions implanted in her mind, to carry and preserve for the future, or reproduce in her children, or implant in the memory of future generations. This is a brilliant, even provocative dialogue, particularly to every Palestinian man and woman. It casts doubt upon the time before the devastation, the displacement, and the exile, in which the homeland was an enchanting dream, untouched by anything that might have pointed to its approaching end… and then came the ecological catastrophe (probably an allusion to the Nakba of 1948), which destroyed everything.

There is no mention in the work of a specific enemy who might be behind the calamity that destroyed Bethlehem – neither Jewish, nor Zionist occupier, nor Western colonialist. There is no mention at all of the occupation, of a bleeding wound, of murder or war. There is no reference to Palestine's *Nakba* and the displacement of its residents to camps of refugee existence and death, based on real events that occurred in Palestine. There is no clue as to what had happened and is still happening in Palestine after the *Nakba*: no description of the separation wall, no mention of land appropriations or house demolitions by the forces of the Israeli occupation, no representation of

killings, torture, or prisons. However, the film contains unforgettable scenes that are imprinted in the viewer's memory. They become new memories, like in the process of embedding a memory copied from the lady-mother into that of the viewer, as reflected in the figure of the girl. The artist attempts to articulate the questions of memory, to represent/re-plant it in a very intelligent way.

Certain experiences to which Sansour returns in the film suggest attributes and styles that have been almost mandatory in Palestinian art since its early days, at the beginning of the Modernist movement (by artists such as Ismail Shammout, Tamam Al-Akhal, Sliman Mansour, Nabil Anani, Ibrahim Hazimeh, Abed Abdi and others). There is use of Palestinian heritage symbols like typical dress and embroidery patterns, as well as descriptions of the dreamy daily life common (at least in the collective memory): markets, churches, mosques and prayer houses in Jerusalem and Bethlehem; photos of the olive harvest, children's games, old buildings with their Ottoman-style architecture and colorful tiles (which could also be seen in the other room, containing the complimentary installation); scenes from the alleys bustling with women, men, and children; the strong presence of clerics in their special garments; church towers, domes, homes, windows, and the captivating vistas of Palestine. All of them are presented in the film by black-and-white photographs, adding another dimension of that imagined memory, and manipulating the viewer's emotions. The plot of the film, as it leans towards science fiction, makes the most of the entirely realistic significance of these symbols. Sansour re-uses them in a way that is unusual and even contrary to their common usage in Palestinian art for political purposes, through the words of Alia, which intend to deconstruct the process of relying on these symbols to build a memory of the homeland:

Alia (Maisa Abd Alhadi): "I don't care about those peoples you are talking about, or about their stories and their clichés. This struggle, this land, these seasons, this memory that is all metaphors, these smells, this embroidery, all that history narrowed down to a few symbols and several gods, this funeral of our loss, this plague, these catastrophes, this uprooting."

The criticism by the girl, the carrier of memory, is her attempt to chase away the ghosts of the past, which are trying to control her memory. She refuses to rely on the memory, which is, according to Dunia – the mother –the main reason to cling to life, to go on living, and thus becomes life itself, an alternative to it. This is the source of the young woman's doubts regarding the building of a new future without memory. Can the new world disengage from the old one and build a future, build the house and the memory associated with it? At the same time, the owner of the original memory argues that stories, legends, and fictions that have nothing to do with reality are at the foundation of whole nations.

small.jpg **[6]**



[7]Larissa Sansour, installation view of Heirloom, Danish Pavilion, Venice, 2019
Photography: Francesco Galli, courtesy of the Venice Biennale

Dunia (Hiam Abbass): "Whole nations are founded on fictional stories. Facts by themselves remain meaningless and preclude collective vision. Soon, what we've created here will become a legend, and you will be a part of it."

A heated argument develops about the creation of nations and their reliance on myths to formulate a collective identity with memories, struggles, ceremonies, and symbols. Dunia prods this memory, which peoples use to form their historical narrative. The study of Palestinian memory is usually related to catastrophes, next to the issue of identity, which takes up a lot of volume in many works of art, particularly in modern and contemporary art. Perhaps artworks can contain calamities because of the *Nakba*, the displacement, and the refugee situation, which many Palestinians have experienced. Regarding the question of identity, I think it has to do with some confusion among artists about the connection, or lack of it, to the geo-political situation, which interests art thinkers more than it does the general public. It is evident in many artworks that issues of identity play a role in forming the political, social, and gender outlook, which tends to consolidate through the artist's personal experience and his or her relationship with the geographical space they live in. We find that it relates in various ways to the political crisis of Palestinian society, as well as the absence of national independence in a unified homeland that includes all the groups under the concept of the modern state.

Now comes the archive of photographs from the period before Palestine's *Nakba*, with the added image of a black fluid that overwhelms the place, drowning it, as if it were black lava spewing from a volcano, or a river of black blood, or perhaps it stands for oil. The black fluid destroys everything in its path, and the entire place disappears.

The contradiction between the mother's effort to preserve the memory and the girl's distancing and refusal to accept it appears to be the central axis of this work. Alia does not believe in ghosts and does not wish to rebuild the past. She is more interested in the present. Dunia promises Alia that the past is still there, and there's no need to reconstruct it, but Alia replies that the past is Dunia's past, the one she knows, and any other past is just stories, legends, and fiction. At this point, Dunia seals the dialogue with a wonderful statement: peoples are just stories, myths, and fantasies. This axis is what makes this film so unique, since it constitutes a quality leap toward an independent Palestinian artistic thought, which does not belong to any institution, and is not employed politically, or for some establishment's propaganda and publicity aims. It is the film's chief achievement – developing a dialogue and raising questions about the quintessence of a people's memory, which must not be forgotten.

In Vitro_2-channel black and white film_2019_6 small.jpg **[8]**



[9]Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, In Vitro, black-and-white two-track film, 27 min and 44 sec., 2019

Courtesy of the artist

In Vitro_2-channel black and white film_2019_2 small.jpg **[10]**



[11]Larissa Sansour and Søren Lind, In Vitro, black-and-white two-track film, 27 min and 44 sec., 2019
Courtesy of the artist

The installation

Opposite the room where the film is projected, there's another hall containing an installation titled *Monument for Lost Time*: a large black disk moves in a void, its motion unpredictable, incomprehensible. It is unclear where it starts or ends. A sound work accompanies the movement, surprising the viewers with vague notes. As we watch the void, a spinning motion of destruction begins inside the artwork, with all of its ambiguous meanings... but if we enter the room after watching the film, we may be able to connect the two works, which echo each other in their shapes, colors, and sounds. The large circular object is a monument to the great void of our time, an acceptance of the contradiction between the rich memory and the fragments of destroyed memory. Here, in this hall, the artist is working the memory, the text, the dialogue, the characters, and the ''test tube'' into a single sculpture that moves in an impenetrable track, and it overpowers everything. If memory particles can carry the function of memory, then the black-disk sculpture is completely pure, since it represents a memory from a very distant past that cannot produce any memory. Perhaps the memory of the loss that reaches the viewer in this manner is a vessel containing nothing, and thus cannot be defined in words, but it can be sensed through emotions. After watching this work the feeling is of the pain of losing a body part.3

This installation, with its multiple components and meanings, symbolizes the complexity of the search for a safe place, and presents the challenges that a person today faces as disaster strikes, trying to find future solace. The ecological catastrophe in the film, whose causes we ignore, appears as a river of black oil that devours everything and leaves nothing on the face of the earth. Moreover, there is the use of colored tiles with geometric decorations that seemingly symbolize their splendid, ancient, Arab-Islamic past. But these were in reality replications of views and building ornamentations from the lexicon of Western architecture, which engulfed the Ottoman empire and the Arab world in the nineteenth century. These elements were copied in the homes of Palestine's wealthy inhabitants, mostly in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jaffa. Consequently, the

purportedly ancient memory is just a clone stemming from other nations, traditions, cultures, and arts.4

The end…the beginning

This work is another attempt by Sansour to address the conflict in the Middle East, including the violence of the Zionist occupation of Palestine. The artist conveys this context by using a style similar to science fiction or fantasy, as related to a future vision of the catastrophes and devastation that will be visited upon Earth. She uses futuristic elements that might, at first glance, appear to be surreal, totally detached from actual events, but sometimes they point to the very nature of the political situation. This tendency, to turn the dark reality of the past or the present into a futuristic event, is unique in the contemporary Arab art field. In Sansour's view, dealing with reality in this way is preferable to working in the documentary cinema style, for instance, as she has done in some of her earlier works, such as *A Space Exodus* (2009), *Nation Estate* (2012), *In the future they ate from the finest porcelain* (2016), and others.5

My personal encounter with Larissa Sansour in Venice was entirely by chance, after visiting the exhibition for the first time, in the Danish Pavilion. We met outside the pavilion. The encounter was brief but exiting, primarily when the artist discussed her Arabic-speaking film with no blaring slogans, in a space that in no way alluded to any Palestinian political scene, not even an Arab one. But this is an entirely Palestinian–Arab artwork - in the scene of the mother's deathbed recollection, its pessimism, every motion and glance of the two protagonists, and of course, in every sentence they utter.

Photography and cinema may be the new forms of Palestinian art. It is in their power to take Palestinian art out of the local circle and open the door to universality. The influences on Heirloom are cinema, television, and even folk culture and Pop-art. These are important elements that the artist acknowledges, unembarrassed, to be a style close to her heart. This acknowledgment provides space for the analysis of the artwork in cinematic terms, with the inclusion of two talented actresses who portray the roles with perfect skill, conferring a special touch upon the work. Hiam Abbass has plenty of experience playing these kinds of roles, as does Maisa Abd Alhadi, who adds glamor to the film with her eyes and her rejection of the role of the clone intended only to preserve the memory.

The reality of marginal life to which Palestinians are subjected – wherever they are, not just those in the diaspora – is the normal situation of our daily lives. Although the artist did not recognize this specifically, her selection of two women out of what we perceive as the "face" of Palestine, is an expression of that same dismantling, alienation, and marginalization. And so, a young woman living beyond the homeland's borders defines Palestinian art in a new way, free of landmarks, boundaries and political axioms, while still exhibiting the status and sanctity of Bethlehem, in a manner devoid of banality.

I don't know if this film is going to be screened in Palestine any time soon, and how many Palestinian or Arab viewers will watch it, but to me, this is the first Palestinian artwork worth watching to start an open dialogue about the project of framing the memory and documenting the *Nakba*, which aims to turn the stolen homeland into a sanctified thing, and thus leave no space for criticism or imagination. In these challenging times, this artwork proposes to break this rule and turn the aura of sanctity into an open conversation – which is also capable of giving voice to a harsh reality.

Larissa Sansour’s work *Heirloom* was shown at the Danish Pavilion in the 58th Venice Biennale [12].

- 1. For more information on the artist Rula Halawani see the biennale's official Web site: https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2019/partecipants/rula-halawani [13]
- 2. From an interview with Larissa Sansour, in which she talks about her various works: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eBnUvp-_oA [14]

- 3. From the catalogue essay by Nat Muller, the exhibition's curator.
- 4. Larissa Sansour discusses her works (August 3, 2018): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-eBnUvp-_oA [14]
- 5. These three video works were shown in 2018 in an exhibition at Dar El-Nimer for Arts and Culture, Beirut, under the title "A Trilogy of the Scientific Imagination".

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