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Envisioning a new Palestinian museum Khalil Rabah exhibition at Sfeir-Semler Gallery



BY OLGA HABRE ON MARCH 17, 2018

ARTISTS

An exhibition by the Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah, “New Sites for the Museum Departments or four places to visit Heaven” at the Sfeir-Semler Gallery in Karantina, is a hypothetical proposition for a museum in Palestine: the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind. It could actually become a real museum, except its foundation lies on the premise that the current Palestinian condition—the occupation—has to end.

The ambitious institution would display artifacts and artworks in an attempt to reappropriate them and disrupt the iconic representations of Palestine. “The idea behind the museum is to turn symbols of the Palestinian situation into relics,” explains Rana Nasser Eddin, Beirut director of Sfeir-Semler. “That’s why the artist feels it’s an impossibility, because it would mean that the struggle would have ended, for them to be rendered into the past.”

The artist has been developing his idea since 1995, gradually adding new elements. In its present form in Beirut, it is divided into four sections—botanical, earth and solar system, geology and paleontology, and anthropology—spread through four adjacent rooms. The exhibition starts with four cloth maps representing the locations of the four sections: Lying flat on the floor are maps of the West Bank, the Dead Sea, and Gaza, and suspended in mid-air is a new map of a Brazilian favela, or slum, nicknamed Nova Palestina.



The first room houses the botanical section, using symbols of the botanical world that also represent the Palestinian struggle. One installation, a large rock surrounded by a plastic tube filled with olive oil, has several layers of meaning.

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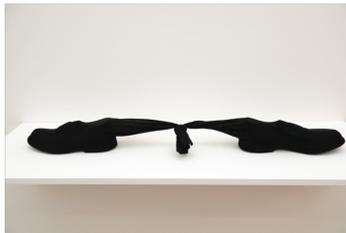
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The rock symbolizes the Palestinian struggle as a widespread symbol of the intifadas, and by wrapping it in the traditional staple of olive oil, Rabah strips it of its power—in this utopian future, it would no longer be needed. The installation is based on performance art the artist created in the 1990s, which, turned into a stationary piece, represents the suspension of time.

Another piece in this section showcases a replica of miniature trees. In reality, Rabah planted five olive trees in Switzerland in 1995. Returning to the spot 12 years later, he discovered that only one had survived, and requested the Swiss government give the tree honorary citizenship or allow it to be moved back to Palestine—symbolic of the right of return for Palestinians.



In the earth and solar system section, Rabah examines the earth’s core and the external factors that affect humans. Hanging on one wall is a replica of Sliman Mansour’s iconic, Dali-esque painting, “Camels of Hardship,” depicting an old farmer literally struggling under the weight of Jerusalem on his back. In front of the canvas stands a statue modeled after the man in the painting, but no longer carrying the city—the burden is removed. On another wall is a traditional Palestinian keffiyeh, drained of its threads like it’s being bled. A third piece in the room is a sarcophagus holding Hebrew letters that spell out “Palestinian Liberation Organization.” By reclaiming a language, the artist references the fact that Palestinians aren’t officially taught Hebrew in schools, while Israelis are often taught Arabic.



Next is the geology and paleontology section, which deals with discomfort in the human condition. From a miniature of a tunnel to Gaza, used for smuggling, to a pair of two right-foot shoes and a truck piled with various items, it illustrates an unnatural, uncomfortable state where it’s impossible to move freely or be a fully functional being.

The final section, anthropology, is a newer piece added by the artist to this ongoing project. On display are photos from Brazil’s Nova Palestina, a slum for displaced Brazilians. Here, the idea of a Palestinian camp is broadened to a global condition of homelessness rather than a local predicament, and “Palestine” takes on a new meaning. Nasser Eddin explains, “You don’t have to be Palestinian to live a Palestinian condition. It’s less about the individual and more about a global condition.” In the large photos, all the people have been physically cut out, leaving strange, glaring gaps in the prints. In the center of the room lies a small suitcase entirely covered in Band-Aids—signifying that a displaced life packed into a suitcase is just a Band-Aid solution.



In the final room, the gallery built a wall where an opening once took visitors back to the first room in the art space—a physical and symbolic dead end. While Rabah’s hypothetical museum is, so far, just a dream that reclaims Palestine, maybe for a moment we can make believe that we are in a vision of the nation that could be. Maybe in the future, when we hope there is a liberated Palestine, we can look back at this project as, not just a predictive relic, but an omen. The exhibition is ongoing until April 7.

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