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Experiencing a new culture has had a profound effect on Palestinian artist Manal Mahamid



Palestinian artist Manal Mahamid

By Claire Corrigan

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Her work explores identity, memory, and the influence of political and ideological factors on landscape and ecology.

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Participating in the Technical Development Residency (TDR) programme at The Leitrim Sculpture Centre, Manal is utilising advanced techniques in print, ceramic glass, and wood to create a new body of work that delves into the impact of colonialism on the ecological balance of the Palestinian landscape and its connection to the concept of home navigation.

She was previously commissioned by The Dock to write a response to the Jackie McKenna installation titled 'When a clay turns to a narrative of resistance and identity,' which was displayed at the arts centre in 2021.

Colonial



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As Manal states, “Such barriers prevent not only humans from moving from one side to another, but also animals, affecting catastrophically on the local ecology.”

“At the same time, millions of displaced people worldwide face a similar fate as they are prevented from returning to their motherland due to political barriers at transfer policies between state borders.

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“The right to return home is a fundamental right for every human, and non-human, being. Just like other human rights, such as the right to housing and food a people's right to equality.”

Speaking to the Leitrim Observer, she shared some insights into her upbringing.

“I grew up in a village around 50km from Haifa. There are around 2 million Palestinians living as citizens of this apartheid state, and few millions in the West Bank and Gaza, alongside the majority of Palestinians who are forced to live far away from home in the diaspora, due to the displacement crimes committed by the Zionists.”

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“My home Haifa city - it's on the coast - I am living between Dublin and Haifa and currently doing the MA Cultural Policy and Arts Management course at UCD. I got the opportunity to do this art residency for one month.

“I'm working on a project that will be in Waterford next year, a solo show.”

The mother-of-two has a son who is 12 and a daughter who is 20 and one of her exhibitions derives from a day out with the two children (The Tale of a Gazelle 2

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“Your entire life is involved in politics not because you are looking for stories; it's part of your daily life there.

“For one of my previous projects the starting point was from a visit to the zoo with my two children. Even in the zoo, one has to confront the reality of colonialism attempting to erase the original name that was given by a German scientist before the establishment of Israel.

In the zoo, there was a sign describing the Palestinian gazelle, written in three languages - Arabic, English, and Hebrew.

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“In Arabic and English, it said, 'Palestinian gazelle,' but in Hebrew, it said 'Israeli gazelle'. So even during my daily life, just visiting the zoo, colonialism jumps out at me instead of the beautiful things,” she said.

“The topics I explore in my work mostly revolve around landscape identity. For me, identity is abstract, extending beyond religion, nationality, or gender. It's about our experiences and the things we have encountered in the past.

“These collective experiences shape a diverse range of identities that evolve and change continuously, transcending all other aspects.

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“The fact that I am currently living here, experiencing a new culture, and discovering new things has a profound impact on my art. I believe that in the coming years, elements and influences from this place will significantly shape my artistic expression.

“The reason I identify myself as a Palestinian artist is deeply connected to the ongoing events in Palestine; it's impossible to ignore the situation. Otherwise, I would prefer to simply call myself an artist.

“I've had the privilege of visiting many beautiful countries, and I am not driven by nationalism. However, the present circumstances in Palestine lead me to embrace the label of a Palestinian artist.

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She mentioned how the landscape in Palestine became entangled in political and religious disputes.

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“When you are a child, you don’t understand. I loved the landscape. We lived in a rural village, and most of my time was spent in this lovely landscape,” Manal said.

Another of her previous projects was called ‘Jewish Trees.’

“My house growing up was located on the edge of the village close to pine tree forest. These pine tree forests were planted by the Jewish when they established the Israel state. They came and brought with them lots of plants to erase the original landscape. The way they are planted is like a machine, systematically - lines and lines of them.

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“In the last five or six years, we witnessed many fires in these landscapes because it also harms the ecological aspect. Many of these plants are from Europe and resist the heat there,” she explains.

She shared that the subjects she explores through her art organically come to her.

“My starting point is personal, and then as I begin each project, I engage with people and use archival material. Almost every project is connected to my personal

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“However, it gradually expands and encompasses not just my own story but also the stories of many other people.”

‘Love Me, Love Me Not’

Another project was inspired by a love letter she received from her now husband and called ‘Love Me, Love Me Not’.

“The way he started this letter involved many issues that were going on at that time like the south Lebanon conflict. He wrote it for my birthday, and we were in touch as a young couple, lovers.

“We were in our twenties, and he was metaphoric about what was going on between us at that time and what was going on between Lebanon and Israel.

“When he wrote this, I wasn’t even an art student. Three years later I decided to study art and to use this letter in my art.

“It’s personal and about emotions but also involved politics because of what was going on in the country. I believe he was 23 and no one who is that age cares about south Lebanon. When you decide to write, it’s coming unconsciously to your thoughts.”

Manal earned her Master’s in fine arts at the University of Haifa in 2006, where she obtained a scholarship of Excellence.

She received a degree in Museology and Curation from the University of Tel Aviv four years later.

Her work has been part of several exhibitions in London, Chicago, Cairo, Dusseldorf, Haifa, Ramallah, Um El Fahim, and Jericho and in over 70 group exhibitions.

She also exhibited her work as part of the Qalandiya International Festival in 2014 and 2016, organised by the Arab Culture Association in Haifa.

For more on Manal Mahamid, you can visit www.manalmahamid.com.