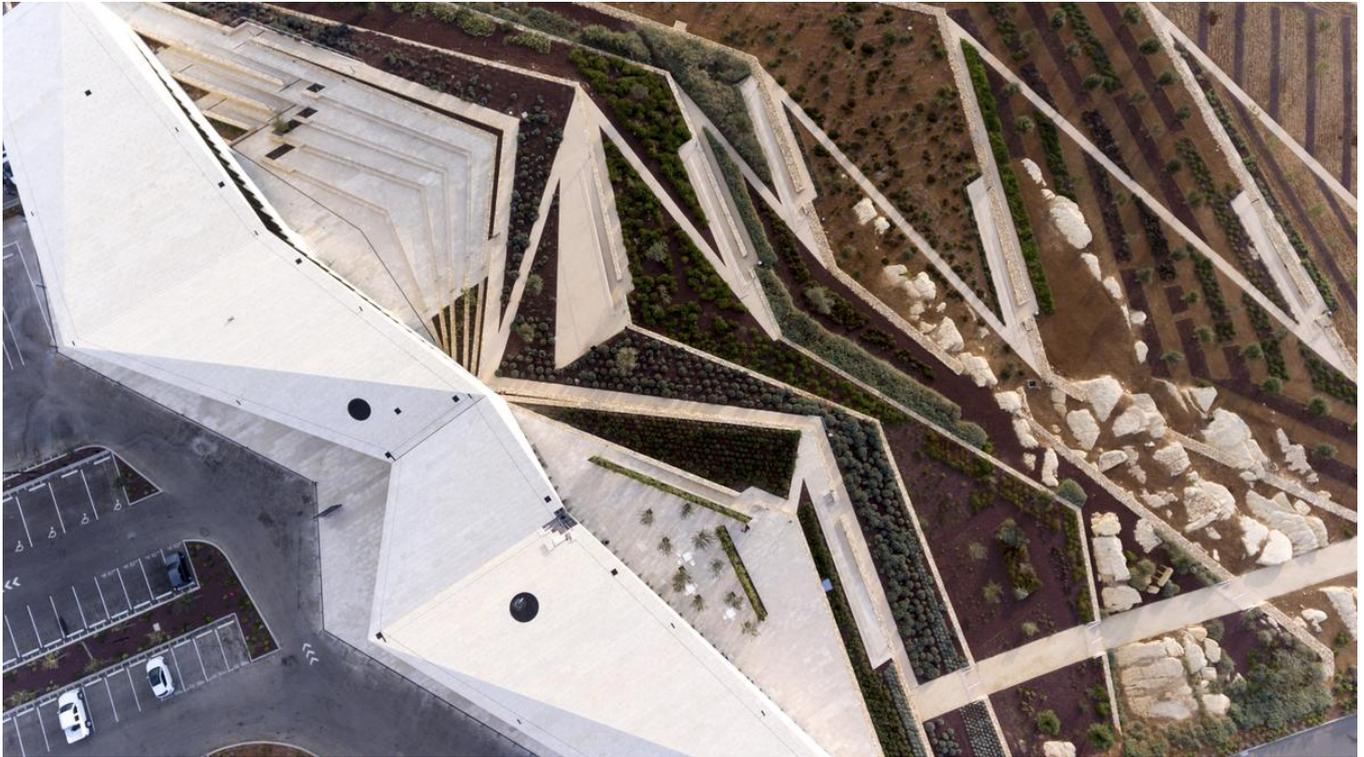


Reem Fadda's Jerusalem Lives at the Palestinian Museum

[Nick Leech](#) Aug 24, 2017



The Palestinian Museum, Birzeit. Iwan Baan © the Palestinian Museum

In May last year, when the Palestinian Museum was first unveiled on the outskirts of West Bank university town Birzeit, the US\$24 million (Dh88.2m) building may have been complete, but its galleries stood empty.

Never Part, the exhibition planned for the inauguration by the museum's then director, Jack Persekian, had been cancelled just before the opening by the museum's board.

The cancellation accompanied Persekian's dismissal, but the opening ceremony went ahead as planned on May 16, the day after the commemoration of the 68th anniversary of the Nakba, or day of catastrophe.

“We are celebrating the fact it is completed on time. We are celebrating the gardens,” said the museum’s chairman, Omar Al-Qattan, who was quoted by the AFP news agency at the time of the opening. “We wanted to stick to a date – I think it is very important psychologically for us to be able to make promises that we keep. So we decided to open now rather than wait for the inaugural exhibition.”

Now, after a 15-month hiatus, that wait is finally over. On Sunday at 5pm, the museum’s inaugural show will open to the public.

Curated by Reem Fadda, the former associate curator for Middle Eastern art at the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi who was also responsible for the UAE’s National Pavilion at the 2012 Venice Biennale, *Jerusalem Lives* spills out from the museum’s central exhibition spaces and across its landscaped terraces, looking to Jerusalem and beyond.

While Fadda admits there was never any question the museum’s inaugural exhibition would address the painful and politically fraught issue of the city, the thinking that has informed the show is as damning as it is ambitious.

Through *Jerusalem Lives*, Fadda simultaneously identifies the city as - globalisation’s wellspring and also as the site of its destruction – a place where cosmopolitanism, multiculturalism and openness have withered in the face of a xenophobia that now appears contagious.

The result is a portrait of Jerusalem that is part requiem, part prophecy and part reckoning.

“Metaphorically, if we accept that globalisation started in Jerusalem, then let’s look how it has failed in Jerusalem and how this kind of failure has been exported to the rest of the world. This is my thesis,” Fadda explains.

“You have failing multiculturalism and this intensified language around

security, surveillance, militarisation, police states, gentrification, the exclusion of indigenous people, intolerance of others," she insists, pointing to the rhetoric that now dominates discussions of life in newer global cities such as London and Paris.



Reem Fadda, curator of Jerusalem Lives. Photo by Sofia Dadourian

“When you have that kind of language, you start to understand that this

was accepted worldwide because of what was happening in Jerusalem, and those same logics of control have now been exported everywhere else."

Fadda admits that she has a difficult relationship with Jerusalem, both emotionally and politically. "It breaks my heart because I see it as a dead city, and emotionally, I don't know to deal with that," she says.

"I want to show what it means to have a military occupation enforced on the city and exclusionary policies. This is very real, and it can be seen in zoning and house demolitions, in a stifled economy, in every facet of the city where rules are applied that have caused its death," she continues.

"It's fascinating to see this in the microcosm of an exhibition, because it allows you to see this in all its intensity and how, because the world finds it completely acceptable, it has become the norm everywhere else."

Jerusalem Lives features work by 48 artists including Ramallah-based Khaled Jarrar, who has used work based on the Israeli occupation of the West Bank as a starting point for broader investigations of militarisation and violence; and Khaled Hourani and Emily Jacir. All three are associated with the International Academy of Art Palestine, the Ramallah-based art school that Fadda helped to establish in 2006.

At the heart of *Jerusalem Lives* is a maze-like exhibition space, featuring a host of audio-visual works and research that has been designed to evoke the noise and confusion of the city centre.

Fadda initially saw this as a place for the presentation of research about the city, rather than art, but admits she had a change of heart.

"It's overwhelming, and initially I wondered whether it would be appropriate to put the work of artists in such a setting or whether I should relegate them to the landscape outside, where the experience is calmer

and more aesthetic," the curator says. "In the end, I decided I would do both, so it ended up housing a lot of works by artists I consider visionary, who are really involved with ideas of agency and exclusion, openness and belonging."

These include Jerusalem-born photographer Ahed Izhiman, who has created a panoramic photograph of five Israeli settlements that encircle the city's eastern perimeter, and veteran Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, whose installation, *Present Tense*, has been recreated more than a decade after it was first exhibited in Jerusalem's Gallery Anadiel in 1996.

Made from 2,400 square blocks of traditional olive-oil soap from West Bank city Nablus, and thousands of red beads, *Present Tense* maps the disconnected territories that, according to the Oslo Accords of 1993, would be returned to Palestinian control.

As well as works by Oscar Murillo, Adrian Villar Rojas and Mumbai-based artist Sudarshan Shetty, *Jerusalem Lives* also includes a new installation by the UAE's Mohammed Kazem, *Directions (Border)*, which has been applied directly to the museum's windows and casts shadows across its floor.

Building on Kazem's long-standing interest in notions of place, location and dislocation, *Directions (Border)* lists the co-ordinates of cities that he has been unable to visit as a result of his nationality, including Jerusalem and Beirut.

Outside the museum, which was designed by Dublin-based architects - Heneghan Peng in 2011, a series of 18 installations can be found on the building's roof and terraces, which afford views over the rocky hills and valleys and surrounding towns and villages.

On the museum's terrace, Ramallah-based artist, curator and art critic Hourani has installed a pair of binoculars that allows viewers to look at a

major, three-metre-wide installation that he has mounted on the side of a house in an adjacent village.

Made of tiles, the work reads “a compass that does not point to Jerusalem”, a partial quote from the work of well-known Iraqi poet - Muzaffar Al-Nawab, which says “a compass that does not point to Jerusalem is faulty”.

Farther down the ridge that forms the site of the museum, Swiss artist Bob Gramsma has constructed an enormous, 150-tonne sculpture, *Facts on the ground Ol#17241*, from concrete, steel reinforcement and soil. Constructed by using a natural cavity in the ground as a mould, the tectonic work not only looks like a part of the natural landscape, but also helps to frame it, while inviting visitors to climb over it, stand on it and sit beneath it, raising questions about the relationship between sculpture and landscape, presence and absence, identity and soil that speak directly to its immediate environment.

As well as the internal shows and external installations, *Jerusalem Lives* will also include a public programme, which has been organised in conjunction with existing Jerusalem-based cultural institutions and a catalogue, produced in partnership with the *Jerusalem Quarterly*, a long-standing journal that focuses exclusively on the city of Jerusalem’s history and future.

“I sat with the editor, Salim Tamari, and said that I wanted to produce a special edition where he gave me a topic that would become the anchor for the catalogue,” Fadda says. “He decided that it should consist of 13 essays about the lives of some of the most-important Jerusalemites and came up with the title, *Jerusalem Lives*, and that’s how we arrived at the title of the show.”

Written by figures such as the Jerusalem-born artist Kamal Boullata and Palestinian-American academic Lila Abu-Lughod, the essays include

profiles of historical figures such as pioneering physician, medical researcher and ethnographer Tawfiq Canaan and Jerusalemite artist and educator Daoud Zalatimo.

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When she was invited to curate the show last December, Fadda admits the prospect of staging such a large, politically charged exhibition was daunting, after almost a decade spent living and working abroad, mostly in New York.

“Given the tight time frame, I have to admit that I was nervous about accepting [the commission]. As a Palestinian with a West Bank ID, it’s a place I can’t even visit without a permit or being smuggled in,” she admits, describing the experience of returning to curate the show as “supercharged”. “But now that I’m back, it’s like I’m finally regaining my footing with something I’m much more comfortable with. It feels like I’m really dealing with the political situation and looking it straight in the eye.”

That sense of political and aesthetic engagement and confrontation has marked Fadda’s work as a curator since earlier years in the West Bank when she worked on projects such as *Liminal Spaces*, which was designed to allow Arab and Israeli artists to voice their criticism of the construction of the separation wall that cuts through the West Bank.

“Through my studies and my work at the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, I’ve always been a proponent of art that has emerged from the global south that is politically and socially aware and that speaks to society,” Fadda insists. “I think what’s happening here in Palestine is a great example of that. It’s a very active art that is loud and that really speaks to the needs in society.”

Back at the museum’s inauguration ceremony in May last year, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas declared: “This museum will tell the world – the entire world – that we were here, we are still here, and we will continue to be here to build our independent state. Nobody can deny us this right.”

As defiant as it is eloquent, Fadda’s ambitious *Jerusalem Lives* follows similar landmark events around the world, such as Palestine’s first participation in the Venice Biennale in 2009, as the latest statement in a political struggle that knows no boundaries.

“Working on a show that is taking the pulse of the city and addressing things that are so urgent for us now, especially given what has happened recently at Al Aqsa,” Fadda says, describing the experience as a sort of political and intellectual homecoming. “But for me, this is a cultural extension of that protest.”

Jerusalem Lives (Tahya Al Quds) runs from August 27 to December 15 at the Palestinian Museum. Go to www.palmuseum.org

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