

# Intimate Terrains: the exhibition that spans nearly nine decades of Palestinian art



A still from Larissa Sansour's 'Nation State' video, which depicts a solution for Palestine that condenses it into a high-rise theme park. Iwan Baan / The Palestinian Museum

Travelling to the Palestinian Museum to see its current exhibition in Birzeit via Israel – there is no other way to get there – is a sobering but telling journey that foreshadows a modicum of what is to come in Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape.

By car, it is an hour-plus journey from Jerusalem during which one witnesses a Kafkaesque kaleidoscope of checkpoints, road blocks, Israeli settlements, the serpentine separation barrier and Palestinian population centres such as Ramallah.

But the journey is worth it. The exhibition, curated by Tina Sherwell, head of the contemporary visual art programme at Birzeit University, is a diverse collection of visual art spanning nearly nine decades, incorporating painting, sculpture, photography and video installations. Adila Laidi-Hanieh, the museum's director, says the display represents a first: it is the largest exhibition of Palestinian visual art to ever be held in Palestine.

"This is a remarkable panorama and retrospective, and is the first exhibition that crosses so many periods and genres of Palestinian art, and gathers such a kaleidoscope of artists," she says.

## **Themes of loss, fragmentation, erasure and resistance**

It represents Palestinian artists from Gaza, the occupied West Bank, Jerusalem, also Israel and many from the diaspora who are unable to visit Palestine. As the title suggests, the exhibit encompasses themes of loss, fragmentation, erasure and resistance.

The geographic fragmentation of artists represented is both telling and compelling. Intimate Terrains opens with Larissa Sansour's surreal, dystopic nine-minute video, *Nation State* (2012), which depicts an imposed solution on Palestine, condensing it into a kind of high-rise theme park, with each floor a facsimile of a historic element of Palestinian identity: the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem's other holy sites, Bethlehem's Manger Square and Church of the Nativity, Palestine's coastal areas, Jaffa, olive groves and more. It's a virtual reality of Palestine segmented and stacked vertically to accommodate Israel's expansion across Palestinian land.



Dr. Tina Sherwell

Jawad Almalhi's panoramic photographic print, entitled *Tower of Babel Re-visited* (2008), features near the start of the exhibition. This wide image ditches traditional, pastoral views of Jerusalem's beautiful Old City and focuses on the claustrophobic and grim Shu'fat Refugee Camp, home to more than 100,000 Palestinian refugees, walled off from their city, and book ended by Israeli settlements. It is clearly a tale of two cities, particularly relevant with Israel's campaign of demolitions in recent months, displacing hundreds of Palestinians, and its ongoing construction of thousands of new homes in East Jerusalem.

There are several pieces by Sliman Mansour, one of Palestine's oldest and most respected artists. These works show his stylistic developments over several decades. *Yaffa* (1979) is a painting steeped in idealisations of an idyllic, rural Palestine, with men and women gathering oranges from

bountiful trees, typical of Palestinian paintings in the 1970s. In the foreground is a strong, statuesque woman representing the motherland, dressed in traditional embroidery, staring into the distance or perhaps towards a future that longs for a happy past.

It contrasts with his *Drought* (2005), a large piece which is a collection of suspended fragments of mud on wires depicting two people on either side of a field of olive trees. It makes for a powerful statement of broken people and a fractured landscape, with a title that suggests prolonged hardship, suffering and damage.

## **An 'apocalyptic, dystopic vision' of Palestine**

Some of the most moving artworks in the exhibition are by artists from Gaza who live and work in exile in the Arabian Gulf and Europe.

Aissa Deebi's *This is How I Saw Gaza* (2019) comprises a row of nine hybrid black-and-white prints. Each image is a still captured from television media coverage of Israel's assaults on Gaza. The explosions and destruction captured in them convey the powerlessness and sadness of those in exile, who can do little but watch from afar.

Similarly, Taysir Batniji's *GH0809* (2010) focuses on the destruction inflicted on his native Gaza. He asked a friend to photograph Palestinian homes badly damaged or destroyed in Israel's 2008-09 military strikes, and has created 20 prints with descriptive text for each, arranged to look like a real estate agent's office window.

Each destroyed building is accompanied by an upbeat prose that focuses on the selling points of each home, while ironically conveying the profound human impact that thousands of families in Gaza have faced with the heart of the family unit – the home – subjected to such destruction. The text accompanying one photo of a damaged multilevel building reads: "North of Al Shati refugee camp; 150 metres from the

beach; area: 320 square metres on 1,250 square metres of land. Ground floor: reception room, warehouses. Five floors composed each of three rooms, living room, dining room, kitchen, two bathrooms/wc. Nine hundred-square-metre orchard of olive trees, fig trees, vines, and a fountain. Garage in the garden. Unrestricted sea view. Inhabitants: five families (23 people)."

The exhibition concludes with a number of works that show a disturbingly unrecognisable landscape. Two watercolours by Samira Badran, an artist from Barcelona, are stylistically very different from everything else in the collection and were influenced by Israel's occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967. *Jerusalem* (1978) is an "apocalyptic, dystopic vision of the city" says curator Sherwell, represented by a number of defunct mechanical contraptions. It is rendered completely unrecognisable by machines and stonework that suggest antiquity but, for a city of extraordinary importance to the three monotheistic religions, it is devoid of humans and any sense of spirituality.



A still from Larissa Sansour's 29-minute video installation 'In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain', 2015. Courtesy Larissa Sansour

Badran's self-portrait is haunting too, of a woman trapped and muzzled by her clothing, rendered in intricate detail. The artist stares into the distance while behind her the sea and sky loom large in a small, white, whimsical-looking place – perhaps, Paradise?

The exhibition begins as it opens, with a video installation by Sansour titled, *In the Future, They Ate from the Finest Porcelain* (2015, 29 minutes), which she describes as residing "in the cross-section between sci-fi, archaeology and politics". It is a fascinating and disturbing piece around a former resistance leader and her conversation with her psychiatrist.

Intimate Terrains provides a rich, poignant and often unsettling insight into

realities and complexities – physical, mental, emotional and psychological – of Palestinian identity vis-a-vis their land. Sherwell says it has been two years in the making and reflects her long-standing interest in Palestinian landscape art.

Unsurprisingly, creating an exhibition of this size and nature faced numerous challenges, mainly bringing artworks across Israeli-controlled borders, she says. “We wanted to have the work of Mona Hatoum, but that was very challenging to bring. There were also technical elements for Taysir Batniji’s real estate piece – he often has it lit and that was very difficult for us to do.”

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**Adila Laidi Hanieh**

Another challenge is that a predominantly pro-Israeli narrative has dominated much of the mainstream media coverage of this region for the public in the West. The museum uses the glass gallery outside the exhibition area to challenge the myths and misinformation through a series of documents that set out the facts in digestible infographics and text created by Visualising Palestine. It is a wealth of information that puts the exhibition into a clearer perspective.

“We decided to provide a space in the glass gallery to develop the discursive historical and political framings of the issue of land through the main themes highlighted in the gallery. The art is in one space, the

politics are in another space," says Laidi-Hanieh.

This is accompanied by a programme of regular lectures and symposia around the themes. "What we're aiming to expand in the coming months and years is the knowledge and research-based side of our public programming on top of the regular education and public programme that we provide," says Laidi-Hanieh.

It is a remarkable and important exhibition. What would do the scope of the artworks and materials proper justice would be if galleries in major cities around the world picked it up and spread the word. Then the loss of Palestinian land might be better understood.

*Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape is on at The Palestinian Museum until December 31*

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