

A Palestine that's two-thirds fictive | Arts & Ent , Culture | THE DAILY STAR

BEIRUT: Khalil Rabah has been making art for nearly 20 years now. In these two short, eventful decades, he has done a number of things that few artists from his hometown of Ramallah or elsewhere in the region might ever think or want to do.

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He has created a gallery, a foundation and a center for the preservation of cultural heritage, named Riwaq and, curiously, those three initiatives are real. That six of these nine projects are fictions, but three of them are not, tugs at just one of the clever narrative and conceptual threads tangled up in the story of Rabah's work.

In 1995, for example, he shipped five olive trees from Ramallah to Geneva and planted them in a public park. Then, after 12 years had passed, he applied for citizenship on their behalf, arguing that the trees had fulfilled Switzerland's naturalization requirements. The case, as Rabah tells it, is still pending.

In 2004, he auctioned off eight pieces of landscape – not paintings but actual plant specimens, dirt and debris – from the area surrounding part of Israel's security wall in Palestine. Claiming the sale was in fact a performance and an artwork and therefore an elaborate hoax, three of the buyers refused to pay. Not surprisingly, notes Rabah, those same three buyers were also artists.

In 2008, he opened the Beirut office of the United States of Palestine Airlines in a storefront on Hamra Street during the fourth edition of Home Works, a forum on cultural practices organized by Ashkal Alwan.

There was a model airplane, four clocks set to different time zones, an upside-down map of the world and a bus parked outside, which really took people to the airport. The

strangely nostalgic, streamlined modernism of Khalil's mock USPA office was weirdly similar to that of the (real) Iraqi Airways office that subsequently opened (and eventually closed) just a few blocks away.

Yet to sort out the real from the fake, the fictions from the facts, or the knowing parodies from the accidental ironies is to miss the point of Rabah's work.

His first solo exhibition in Beirut, now up at the Beirut Art Center, is titled "Review." This is a critic's nightmare – one feels his or her arrival has been anticipated and pre-empted. It features just three works but each is a sizable installation. They may fit together into a larger project, or they may not, in which case they may just be three solid examples of where Rabah's practice stands today.

What is interesting – and what should instigate some critical debate about Rabah's work – is that one of the works is a roomful of sculptures, another is a roomful of paintings and the last, most ambitious and most elaborate is a sculptural installation of paintings that mimics the look of museum storage.

These are incredibly physical, tactile and materially present pieces for an artist whose overall project hinges on language, rhetoric and mostly immaterial gestures and conceits. They take up a great deal of space and just about fill the Beirut Art Center's ground floor exhibition galleries.

Yet viewers still have to search for the meaning of each work in the fine print that comes alongside it or is buried within it. The relevant question may be whether such large-scale items are effective or even seductive enough to pull those viewers in and keep them looking for clues, or whether you find the argument convincing that these are conceptual works dressed in traditional forms because paintings and sculptures are more familiar to a wider audience.

"Another Geography" (2009-2012), installed at the far end of the BAC, consists of piles upon piles of postcards, 50 of them in total and 7,000 copies of each. Each of the postcards features the name and an image of a village in Palestine, and the stacks are arranged in such a way as to replicate the untenable fragmentation of the territory.

As visitors to the exhibition, we are free to take the postcards away with us. As we do, we diminish Rabah's geography of Palestine even more, which makes us complicit in a performance that deliberately smudges the lines, and blends the political implications,

among generosity, excess, scarcity and theft.

"Two Exhibitions" (2012) is a series of six paintings divided into seemingly identical pairs. The subject? People at a recent exhibition in Sharjah, looking at paintings of people at historical (perhaps fictional) exhibitions in Palestine themselves looking at paintings of, say, dots or myths or nationalist icons or modernist masterpieces.

Put another way, these are paintings of photographs twice removed, and the family tree reveals something of the absence of art in the political history of the region's most intractable conflict.

Rabah makes these works by taking photographs to workshops in China, where teams of four or five people copy the images and turn them into large, photorealist oil paintings. Like much of his work, "Two Exhibitions" offers an absurdist take on the fascination among contemporary artists for archives and documentation.

"In This Issue" (2006-2012) is the latest manifestation of Rabah's project known as the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, a musée imaginaire that is described, in the institution's archly written newsletter, as "cubist in its impossibility."

Other jewels in the text include a note on the newsletter's financial affiliations ("Sponsorship is to advertising what morphine is to heroin, the last benevolent step before the arrival of pure destruction") and an update from the earth and solar system section ("It is just a beginning. Humankind doesn't know why ... Everything on this earth throbs with a sadness which is not confined to weeping.")

The newsletter – whose pages are painted here on huge canvases that slide in and out of a storage rack – provides the architecture for the second of the installation's explicitly constructed but only vaguely theatrical acts. The first, "Act I: Carving" (2012) is a huge slab of granite carved with the museum's name, appended with the words "Newsletter, Summer 2011." The third, "Act III: Molding" (2012) is a neon sign conveying that the last summer's edition of the newsletter is a reflection on the museum's institutional history.

The strength of the work is inherently literary, and Rabah's texts counter with the insufferable dullness of the newsletter form with bursts of brilliance. But the structural form of the installation also has its hidden charm.

The aisles between the sliding paintings are just wide enough for a viewer to slip through

and get lost inside the work. There, it seems all the complicated ideas, secrets and lies underpinning the museum and Rabah's work belong, in the end, to the same species of longing.

Khalil Rabah's "Review" remains on view at the Beirut Art Center in Jisr al-Wati through Aug. 18. For more information, please call 01-397-018 or visit www.beirutartcenter.org

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