

borderlines



April 28, 2021

Art,
Activism,
and the
Presence of
Memory in
Palestine:
Interview
with
Palestinian
Artist Rana
Bishara





Hunger Strike/Ticking Freedom

LILA ABU-LUGHOD

Lila Abu-Lughod: We are so pleased that you have given us the opportunity to feature some of your artwork on the covers of the three issues of volume 41 of *CSSAAME*. I wonder if we could start by your telling us a bit more about these works. One is a nest filled with prickly pear cactus “eggs.” The second is a remarkable piece of the natural cactus fiber that appears so often in your work. It looks uncannily like Edvard Munch's 1893 painting *The Scream* and you have titled it *Patient Scream*, with the word *patient* having the double meaning in Arabic of “patience” and “cactus.” The third, which appears on the

cover of this first issue in the volume, is *Hunger Strike/Ticking Freedom*, a photograph of a melting ice cube dripping down a piece of barbed wire (fig. 1). I'd like to start with this because barbed wire is a ubiquitous part of the landscape of occupied Palestine. It appears in various works of yours. In this series that also includes a photograph of barbed wire in a glass of water and salt, titled *Hunger Strike/Broken Imprisonment* (fig. 2). It is unexpected. Can you tell us more about it?

Rana Bishara: *Hunger Strike/Ticking Freedom* from 2016 is the second of a pair of works that began with *Hunger Strike/Broken Imprisonment*, which depicts a piece of barbed wire in a glass of water with salt.

I created this specific artwork, among others dedicated to prisoners, when I was following a major hunger strike by Palestinian political

prisoners in August 2016. As an artist I felt a moral duty to get involved and to support their families. I went regularly to meetings and demonstrations both in historic Palestine and in the solidarity tents set up in Bethlehem's Manger Square and Dheisheh refugee camp, near where I was living at the time. I created and shared online and via social media this art piece in solidarity. After forty days on hunger strike, the prisoners had just escalated the strike by refusing to drink water. I inserted barbed wire in a water glass to show what the state of the body would be after such a long period with no food or vitamins, with only water and salt keeping them alive. Salt is essential and the Israeli prison authorities often deny prisoners salt when they are striking, as special punishment.

If you look sideways at the glass you can see that the barbed wire is enlarged and

looks broken where the water ends. This was my way of demanding, visually and conceptually, a break in the relentless imprisonment and an end to arrests and administrative detention.

These prisoners had only their bodies left to fight with as they demanded their basic rights, such as medical treatment, not to mention freedom. Despite having lost so much weight and being deprived of vitamins and minerals and in some cases coming close to death, they still resisted. Right now, for example, I am thinking about the administrative detainee Maher Al-Akhras, who has been on a hunger strike for eighty-three days.¹

The moment the hunger strikers decided to stop drinking water and salt, I decided to freeze the cup of water with the barbed wire in it to express my sorrow and fear at the irresponsibility of the Israeli state. This was a critical moment when these

prisoners could actually lose their lives. Water and salt were the only things that had been keeping their bodies from collapsing. At a certain point, the frozen water and salt started melting and dripping onto the barbed wire. Those drops spilling onto the barbed wire resembled the tears of the prisoners and their worried loved ones. It was hard to keep the ice from melting, and still the barbed wire kept them imprisoned, the dripping, salty water symbolizing the ticking time that is running out as the strikers risked their lives and irreversible physical damage.

LA-L: Many artists stick to one form and medium but your art practice is unusually adventurous and creative both in form and materials. You are what we might call a multidisciplinary artist. You paint on canvas and paper and do printmaking and photography. But you also make three-dimensional sculptures and installations, such as the monument

commemorating the 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon. You set that up in Bagnolet-Paris, France. You even create live performance pieces. You work with a striking range of materials and textures including cactus, cactus fiber, chocolate, glass, bread, balloons, barbed wire, and plastic restraint ties. You are perhaps best known for your recurrent use of the prickly symbol of Palestinian perseverance, the cactus, which you have pickled in jars, cut into jigsaw pieces, dipped in chocolate, carved, or, as in the image that will appear on the cover of *CSSAAME* 41:2, put in a nest (fig. 3). Why do you insist on continually exploring these materials, some sensuous and natural, and some highly artificial, even while it makes some of your artwork perishable and much of it hard to hang in art galleries?

RB: Looking back, I see themes in my artwork that relate to sociopolitical, moral,

and human issues of suffering, especially women's, due to politics and Palestinians' ethnic cleansing. As a visual artist, I find inspiration from details of everyday life, whether from a smiling child, my surroundings, what I witness daily, and even sounds and fragrances in memory. The medium must serve both the artwork as well as the concept. So I'm constantly changing these. I look for materials that can communicate the complexity of the political situation about which I make my visual and sculptural works and even my performances.

Some of my aesthetic influences came from my family. I grew up in an artistic family, which included four generations of goldsmiths. My father was thirteen years old when he first learned the goldsmith profession from his father. I used to enjoy watching him form and shape silver and gold into amazing shapes—arabesque designs,

flowers, and organic forms— and my father's artistic spirit had a huge influence on me and shaped my artistic taste. Our heritage continued through jewelry that played with abstract and geometric shapes or used Arabic calligraphy. As you know, because you have a few of these paintings, I often use Arabic calligraphy in my works on paper, and even the glass book I made in 1998 called *Nakba Glass Book—Homage to 531 Palestinian Villages and Towns 1948–2000*.² The book was constructed from ten glass sheets with the names of the villages and towns written in black ink. My choice of glass for a book of documentation has an iconographic political function, showing the fragility, urgency, and necessity to resolve the political issues and address the right of the refugees to return, as stipulated by United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194. I also used calligraphy in

a series of artworks that included *My Mona Lisa*, a self-portrait written with my diary that I made in 1996 depicting myself as a free woman with my own perspective on life and feminism (fig. 4).

But back to the land. To belong is to feel a connection to the land, but when land is in dispute, so is one's identity. The beauty of my country, especially the Galilee area where my village, Tarshiha, is located, is overwhelming. We live in a Mediterranean landscape, populated with villages that spread like diamonds across the mountains and hills. Fields are adorned with ancient olive trees and dotted with crowns of cacti. The green terraced hills are marked with old castles and the whole landscape is inlaid with the elegant geometry of Arab/Islamic architecture. From the mountains of northern Palestine where I grew up, and where my ancestors lived for centuries,

one can look onto southern Lebanon and out to the Mediterranean, both of which we have been connected to and from which we are now, in a sense, cut off.

In the searing reality of occupation, nature became my solace. Nonetheless, when I used to walk through the olive groves around my village, secretly reading and memorizing Mahmoud Darwish's poems, I was confronted everywhere with the consequences of the occupation. I saw uprooted olive groves. Looking at cactus plants safeguarding the ruins of demolished towns and villages reminded me constantly of the Nakba (the Palestinian catastrophe) since they were omnipresent remnants of the 531 villages and towns demolished and depopulated in 1948. I started collecting cactus fiber from the rubble as a form of resistance and stitched them together, as if trying to bind Palestine together again.

These delicate shapes I named after our coastal cities, for example, Haifa Balconies. I documented that in photography in the early 1990s. All these experiences affected my visual memory and became the core of my artistic vision. Now you walk around and see that the whole scene is changed with the fake forests all around our historic Palestine and even in Beit Jala in the West Bank, where I lived for many years. On the boundaries of Jerusalem they are manufacturing the so-called Holy Basin, whose aim is to expand Jewish settlements while preventing Palestinian cities, villages, and refugee camps from developing or expanding. The National Jewish Fund planted these forests that distorted the indigenous landscape as a tactic in conquering the land until another illegal settlement could be built. This actually changed the acidity of the soil.

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