



ARTS & CULTURE

Artist Hazem Harb's excavation of the Palestinian past

► The artist pieces together old maps and photos, creating collages of Palestine's past. He talks us through his process

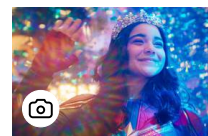


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Palestinian artist Hazem Harb. Reem Mohammed / The National



Melissa Gronlund

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“I was fed up with painting,” Hazem Harb recalls. “I felt almost sick. I started to ask myself what kind of artist I wanted to be: an artist with a mission in life or just a good painter? Maybe it was better for me to work for money, be a commercial artist.”

Harb, a Palestinian artist now living in Dubai, reached a turning point after art college. “I did an investigation with myself, and I looked into my history, my belongings, my story of Palestine. I started to think: I have a mission in my life, with my artwork. Being an artist is not just a job.”

At that point, he had been painting in the almost academic manner taught at Rome’s Academy of Fine Arts. He turned towards Palestine again, and started collecting different items from Palestine’s past before the occupation.

These included photographs, negatives, slides, Palestinian pounds and maps of the area dating back to the 1600s. By now, more than a decade on, friends and Palestinian families from around the world have donated material to him; he has bought other goods at auction. His studio in Umm Suqeim is a treasure trove of ephemera, which he stores following archival practices. With white gloves on, he flips through a Palestinian business directory from 1937. “One of the first car show rooms in the Middle East was in Haifa. One of the first cinemas was the Hamra Cinema, in Palestine. When I found this book, it was like a font of new information. All the businesses, in Arabic and English – you feel like you are in Dubai today.”



'I want to put the images back into time'

Though he was amassing stores of material, it only recently began to appear in his work. Around four years ago, he started painting coloured shapes on a large, almost architectural scale. Slowly, he started folding his archival goods into these paintings. First drawing from sketches, he then places the photographs and maps on paper, layering them in collages with blocks of colours such as earthy greens, tawny yellows or lavender purples. It is geometric abstraction meets archival remains.

“It’s not so easy to find these objects because there’s so much denied about Palestinian history,” he says. “I want to put the images back into time. Philosophically time stopped at that moment [of the Naqba]. Now they are part of the present again.”

Images of fishing boats on the River Tiberius are overlaid against one another, beside blocks of aquatic colours. Another collage shows an olive tree, and a man sitting on the Mount of Olives; the work is titled *This Place Is Mine* (2018). In *Power Does Not Defeat Memory* (2018), cacti crawl across the collage. The images are mostly from the 1920s – from a time pre-Israel – and the colours Harb uses are symbolic. In *Power*, for example, two hilly cutaways shadow each other, one as a photograph and one in grey. The latter, Harb says, “is the colour of concrete – of colonisation.”

Early influence

Harb was born in 1980 and grew up during the First Intifada in Gaza as one of eight children. He was always sketching, drawing portraits of his mother and others around him, and he won a scholarship to the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome. “You have to be 17 to go,” he says. “But they accepted me at 15.”

“Rome was like a dream. I’d seen works by Da Vinci and Michelangelo in books, and there they were. All around me, the city was like a dream to me. I couldn’t believe I was there.”

The Academy gave him a classical education in both fine and applied arts, which are generally kept separate in other western universities. He learnt architecture, sculpture

and draughtsmanship rather than the theory and modern art history that most art students now graduate with. Even now, his work feels sculptural rather than depictive: some corners of colours are bent forwards in works, which are framed in thick Perspex boxes. The use of the rare objects gives his work a push-and-pull between the immediate application of colour and the difficult-to-arrange collaging of historical objects.

Harb's time in Rome also refined the way he thought about his home, giving him for the first time the experience of exile that is so associated with the Palestinian imaginary. "You miss your place, your country," he says. "You are not allowed to be there. It becomes a phantasm. It was so hard for me to see Palestine from outside, not from inside. When you are inside the situation, you do not see it. But when you are outside, you see it from a grand angle."

A sense of belonging

Some of the elements of life that were always just around him took on symbolic resonance. He is toying, for example, with a prototype for a public sculpture inspired by the keys that many older Palestinian women wear around their necks, in the hopes of one day returning to their own homes. But, he says, he can't quite find the right material in which to cast the work.

Others suddenly made sense. Growing up, he had an insatiable curiosity for the old photographs that his mother kept in an old tin for sweets. "I would always say to my mum, let me see your photos! It was such a strange question for a young child to ask," he remembers. "But I knew even then there was something lost in my country. And now, finally, I start to answer why I wanted to look at them. I had a sense of belonging when I looked at them."

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His research also opened up an understanding of the scale of the destruction. Palestine was a thriving economic centre, famous for the learning and intellectualism of its people. One gets the sense that his decision to be an artist "with a mission" – which is a challenge, he concedes: "I have to eat!" – is a way of continuing this tradition into the present, and that it grows in importance as he realises how much has been lost.

"As I started to see more details, study more and search more, I rediscovered my country. As I look through the archives I rediscover the places, I rediscover the history; I feel like a researcher. This is why I ask myself what kind of artist I want to be. It's maturing now. When you use archives, there's a responsibility you have to take on."

Hazem Harb's work will be shown at Sabsay art gallery in Copenhagen, Denmark, from January 31, 2019.

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