

ART & DESIGN | ART IN REVIEW

Khalil Rabah: 'Pages, 7, 8, 9'

By HOLLAND COTTER APRIL 11, 2013

*e-flux**311 East Broadway, at Grand Street**Chinatown**Through April 20*

A decade ago, Khalil Rabah, a Palestinian artist born in 1961 in Jerusalem, founded the fictional Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind. It was, and remains, an ambitious institution, with departments of geology, paleontology, anthropology and botany, all overseen, in a notable feat of disciplinary multitasking, by Mr. Rabah.

Credentials aside, his all-purpose stewardship makes logical sense, given that the museum resides wherever Mr. Rabah resides, usually in the West Bank town of Ramallah. It also, however, travels. In the past it has reconstituted itself at a series of hospitable art biennials: Istanbul in 2005, Venice in 2009 and Sharjah in 2011. At present, it is parked at e-flux's very modest gallery space in Chinatown. Or rather an element of it is: a back edition — summer 2011 — of the museum's seasonal newsletter.

Presented in a super-large-type format — each page is a 3-by-5-foot oil

painting in a sliding metal rack — and fully illustrated, the publication provides an overview of the institution’s permanent collection (objects described as “irreplaceable, priceless and found almost anywhere and at all times”); a report on its recent exhibitions (among them a photographic display of more than 50,000 “historic” buildings in Palestine); a list of new acquisitions (“repatriated” tulip bulbs from the Netherlands); and a sampling of stock from the museum shop, which seems to specialize entirely in olive-related products.

Mr. Rabah’s real-fake museum is basically an ever-changing conceptual essay on colonialism, destruction and survival. It’s funny, mournful, bitter, perverse, pro-nationalist, anti-nationalist, illusion-deflating, consciousness-raising, politically piercing and free. Would that other museums in the city exhibited even a fraction of its qualities.

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