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## Palestine's moving museum

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### Interview

BEIRUT: In 2004, the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind celebrated its 75th anniversary with a landmark exhibition of artifacts from just outside the outer reaches of recorded history. Selections from the museum's various wings - "paleontology," "geology," "entomology" and "anthropology" among them - were linked together to form a historical narrative of the land of Palestine that could be seen as a respite from more contemporary, politically fraught versions.

One year later, the museum was celebrating again, this time marking its 100th anniversary with a first-time display from its permanent collection. Titled "Palestine before Palestine," the show featured uprooted olive saplings preserved behind glass and several cabinets of specimens grouped under the headings "endangered" and "extinct." After viewing the exhibition, museum-goers could linger in an adjacent cafe or browse through a small gift shop for a souvenir of their visit.

The fact that the museum seemed to have aged a quarter-century in one year might raise questions about its trustworthiness as a custodian of the passage of time. If it flubs a mere 25-year span, then what to make of displays purporting to present a record of the millennial past?

The Palestinian museum is immune to such technical reproaches for one durable reason: The museum does not, in the usual sense, actually exist.

"The year that it was established changes because it can reconstitute itself," says Khalil Rabah, the Palestinian artist behind the "museum," in a phone interview from London on Tuesday. "The museum is a permanent concept, but it's a temporary structure ... It could have been any time."

For the record, the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind does exist in three dimensions, although not at a permanent address.

Roughly the size of a shipping container, the museum has appeared in five different incarnations - or "manifestations," to use Rabah's term - in the West Bank city of Ramallah, at the 2005 Istanbul Biennial and, most recently, at an exhibition in Athens entitled "The Grand Promenade," organized by the as-yet-unfinished Greek National Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibition closed on September 29 after a 10-week run.

"It's a museum in exile of some sort," says Rabah, who was born in Jerusalem in 1961.

He earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Texas and co-founded the Al-Mamal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem with Jack Persekian, its current director, and others.

Rabah's museum - which grew out of a wide range of work in conceptual, video and performance art - questions the conventions of the exhibition of art, the political role of art in defining history and, ultimately, the status of a land with a name but no state.

The political implications of the piece are not enough to overshadow its integrity as an artwork, however.

With meticulously labeled "specimens" arranged in a clean interior of glass cases and lighted tabletops, the museum is a precise evocation of an earth sciences exhibition. Seemingly on display are petrified wood and fossilized stone, cores of layered rock and samples of volcanic residue.

Cross-sections of olive trees lie in tiers of drawers that might equally display chips of ancient sediment bearing the imprint of long-extinct bivalve species.

"Everything in the permanent collection is constructed out of aspects of the olive tree," Rabah says. "In the paleontology section, there are pieces made from the olive trunk that look like bones. For the geology section, mainly for the presentation of layers of earth, there are pieces made of olive soap. For the earth and solar system section it's olive coal and crushed olive seeds ... In the section for the volcano, there's a video from a factory that squeezed the olives, creating sort of a drama of the volcano. The volcano ash was made of olive wood ash."

Rabah says the choice of the olive tree as his sculptural medium was natural, although not necessarily foregone.

"There's a deconstruction of the symbolism of the olive tree," he says. "I tried to take it away from its symbolism. The olive tree is an alive thing. It's a living sculptural material ... If I grew up in a tropical area I might use coconuts."

"I had a great sexual experience under an olive tree and that would be a defining moment," he adds.

Rabah traces the inspiration for the Palestinian museum to time he spent in Berlin in 2003, when he visited the remains of the wall which, until the winter of 1989, separated the city into East and West.

"What I realized was this is about the absence of the wall," Rabah says. "I thought of a vision of natural history that can make a statement about the environment, the zone."

Later that year, Rabah visited a section of the barrier currently being built by Israel in the West Bank. He then held a "Wall Zone Auction" of material he collected from the construction area and the Palestinian museum was born.

"Actually the more I think about it now, it was a natural, organic development of what I have been doing for some time," he says.

For "The Grand Promenade," Rabah's work was situated with nothing less than the Acropolis as backdrop.

"When I was approached to do something in that context, the Acropolis - it's now really different than how it looked," he says. "There are no Turkish monuments. Only antiquity is left."

For its appearance in Athens, Rabah also gave his work a subtly different name, calling it the New Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind.

"As I mentioned before, the year was changing - the year was a reference to the manipulation of time," he says. "This playful thing with time ... When you see the 'new,' that means that there was an 'old.'"

Rabah says that by next spring he will be at work installing another piece, a still-unfinished offshoot of the Palestinian museum project.

"It's an airline. It's called USPA - United States of Palestine Airlines," he says. "And it will manifest as an airline office in Knightsbridge in London for the month of March. It will introduce people to this corporate idea."

Will customers really be able to stop by the office in London and book flights?

"What I'm developing now is trying to make something that is not real," Rabah says.

"There's a few approaches to this ... There will be a mileage card, a membership card, the different locations where it would fly to.

"Mostly it's something to do with how one can make something unreal. The establishment of something, and how the concepts develop, and can we develop things through psyche or ..." Rabah leaves it an open thought.

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