

SIGN UP



WEEKEND

Palestinian artist Khalil Rabah questions what's real in landmark Sharjah exhibition

► His challenging retrospective asks what is not, rather than what is



Khalil Rabah subverts fact through fictional structures that in turn make us question reality. Photo: Khalil Rabah



Melissa Gronlund

May 06, 2022



Listen In English



Listen in Arabic

Beta V.1.0 - Powered by automated translation

What Is Not — the title of Khalil Rabah’s challenging, enthralling retrospective at the [Sharjah Art Foundation](#) — is an evasive statement: what is not could be larger than what is. In the context of Rabah, it shows the artist’s connection above all else to the idea of potential: imagine him as a science-professor dad, seeing an empty room and showing that it is, in fact, full of air.

Rabah is best known for his mimicry of art-world structures like the museum, biennial or auction, in a suite of “imaginary” institutions. In 1995, Rabah set up the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, populating it with artwork and adding departments through the years.

In 2004, he held a charity auction for it — calling it the Third Annual War

EDITOR'S PICKS



Ukrainians living 3,500km from home in

UAE



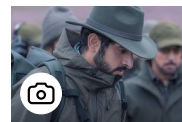
Dubai's Atlantis the Royal Residences

PROPERTY



UAE's latest back-to-school Covid rules

EDUCATION



Sheikh Hamdan wears clothes by

FASHION



The UAE-Iran diplomatic reset is part of a greater

COMMENT

Zone Auction (it was the first) for the 75th anniversary of the museum (which was nine years old) — in which he auctioned off parts of the wall separating the West Bank and Israel. People bid real money and it helped to support Ramallah's Khalil Sakakini Centre, where it was held.

He opened the United States of Palestine Airlines in 2007, creating a fake travel agency — building the logo from a melange of the fonts of different airlines — that had, at different points, real offices in Beirut, Hamburg and London. The logo for the airline was designed by the PDF, or Palestinian Design Force, which was also fake.

In 2008, he started a newsletter for the fictional museum (*The United States of Palestine Times*), producing editions in faux-*New York Times* font, and later commissioned an enormous carved-granite frontispiece to announce the museum's name. These were all inventions but also, of course, all real in the sense that they were actual artworks exhibited by Rabah.



The carved granite newsletter announcing the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind, in *Act I: Carving*, 2012. Photo: Danko Stjepanovic

In addition to these institutions, the Ramallah artist also works closely with existing ones. He helped to establish the Al Ma'mal Foundation in Jerusalem in 1998, and in 2005 set up the Riwaq Biennial, the exhibition arm of the Riwaq Centre for Architectural Conservation.

But a funny thing happened somewhere along the way to inventing the "fake" museum and the real Riwaq: the lines began to blur. At the 2009 [Venice Biennale](#), because Palestine lacked a national pavilion, the Riwaq Biennial entered itself almost as an artwork. It showed photorealist paintings of its brochure and a map referring to the *50 Villages* project, of Palestinian villages rehabilitated by Riwaq. And the oscillation between artwork and institution means Rabah produces real research, albeit under the sign of fiction. For example, for *50320 Names* (2006) the Riwaq Centre documented the people living in Palestinian

villages who did not possess legal ownership of the heritage houses they occupied. The project exists as a living archive, exhibited in the fictional biennial — and as an artwork about the archive.

“At some point what was material became non-material and vice versa,” Rabah says. “That, to me, is also fun, because there's so much accumulation about the project of the museum, or what can fall under the museum, that it became almost tangible. At the same time the biennial gained the potentiality again to become something that is fictional and artistic, and I wanted to go with it without having the institutional responsibility.”

All of Rabah's works, generally speaking, are considered permutations of the fictional Palestinian Museum or collaborations with the biennial. Under the museum's department of common geographies, for example, is Rabah's work *Hide Geographies*. The series showcases examples of [Palestinian embroidery \(tatreez\)](#) in cuts of cloth that resemble the territories from which the style is found. *The lowest point on earth memorial park* (2017) memorialises the recession of the Dead Sea, and — through a steel sculpture — is to be understood as forming a park in the museum.



Khalil Rabah's 'Common Geographies' (2017) uses traditional embroidery from various Palestinian villages, cut in the shape of the different territories. Photo: Danko Stjepanovic

These layers of fiction prove the trickiest part of the Sharjah retrospective, which is curated by Hoor Al Qasimi. Are *Hide*

Geographies and *The lowest point* Rabah's artwork or props buttressing the larger fictional project of the Palestinian Museum?

To answer this, the exhibition avoids the gimmicky decision to reflect the museum apparatus that surrounds his artworks. There is no stepping into a child's funhouse here. The entrance to one gallery gives the impression of walking through the archives or storehouse of a museum, but elsewhere the institution is simply signposted, so the visitor must work to keep the playful apparatus of the imaginary destination in their mind. This is crucial, because without the fictional conceit, the artworks lose gradients of nuance in their meaning.

Consider the wooden sculpture *Lion* (2017) that forms part of the Gaza Zoo Sculpture Garden. It refers to a lion that was smuggled through the tunnels connecting Gaza to Egypt and the outside world — a powerful symbol of the lengths that the entrapped residents of Gaza go to in pursuit of normality. As part of the fictional museum's Sculpture Garden, it retains this nod to the political circumstances of Palestine, with an added tinge of irony. *Lion* highlights the conventions of zoos to require exotic animals: here a creature held captive within a territory itself under captivity.

An affable, garrulous man, Rabah clearly enjoys the uncertainty enabled by the holding frame of the museum. The answer to the question of whether the artworks are Rabah's or the museum's is both, and neither.

Some — although not much — perspective on the idea of a fictional museum can be drawn from other art-historical precedents, such as Marcel Broodthaer's conceptual project, *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* (*Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles*), which the Belgian artist established in 1968, or Benin artist Meschac Gaba's autobiographical *Museum of Contemporary African Art 1997–2002*.



The Palestinian Museum added a lion in 2017 to the collection of its Gaza Zoo Sculpture Park. Photo: Danko Stjepanovic

The idea of art-world structures also has a specific role in the post-Oslo Accords era in Ramallah, where international money poured into setting up civil-society institutions.

And Rabah began his work during the wider art-historical “turns” of the 1990s and 2000s, when artists became curators, archivists and educators. But it’s questionable how far to read the influence of these contexts: on a very basic level, the imaginary museum concept works because it complicates, rather than clarifies. It creates a soft-edged, fuzzy area in which potentiality — what is not — reveals itself.

While the Sharjah retrospective at times labours to keep this fuzziness present, it excels in connecting themes of Rabah’s work from the past 30 years. Al Qasimi’s curation shows how this nebulous area between fact and fiction is also the arena of rights (rights that are given on paper but not in reality).

Other pairings show Rabah’s profound interest in the autonomy and agency of plants and animals. (Note the full title of the museum: of Natural History and Humankind.) In 2008, famously, Rabah sued for Swiss citizenship for one of the olive trees he had planted in Geneva, as part of an earlier project, on the grounds that it had been in the country for 12 years. Why shouldn’t a plant, as a living being, be granted citizenship, and consequently the right of return?

Plants and animals are positioned at the centre of his work, forcing the viewer to think through the world from their perspective. In *Area C fields of gold*, an installation of coils of gold barbed wire, he shows how the colonisation of the West Bank affects the land itself as much as the people living in it, with arable plants traded for barriers.

READ MORE

[Ahmad Al Dhaheer evokes Bedouin science in Louvre Abu Dhabi installation](#)

At times the performativity of Rabah's artwork — the way it is art and merely pretends to be art at the same time — seems a nod to its powerlessness. How is the exhibition of *Area C fields of gold* actually going to help Area C, the

Administrative Division of the West Bank that was meant to devolve to Palestinian jurisdiction under the Oslo Accords, but has not? The answer is more palatable if we understand *Area C* already to be a fiction.

Interestingly, two other major shows on at the moment — the work of the Haerizadeh and Rahmanian collective in the [Parthenogenesis exhibition](#) at the NYUAD Art Gallery and [Taus Makhacheva at the Jameel Arts Centre](#) — also look at the work of artists who play fictional roles (Makhacheva) or subvert conventional ideas of authorship (the Haerizadehs and Rahmanian).

It is perhaps indicative of a wider shift that institutions will struggle to contain. Artists are pushing against art-world norms for production and exhibition, and seeking instead modes that create new relationships with their publics: negotiation and collaboration rather than just display.

Updated: May 06, 2022, 9:02 PM

MORE FROM THE NATIONAL

<p>UAE</p> <p>Courts Government Education Heritage Health Transport Science Environment Megaprojects Expo 2020 UAE in Space</p> <p>Gulf</p> <p>Saudi Arabia Bahrain Oman</p>	<p>MENA</p> <p>Egypt Iraq Iran Jordan Lebanon Syria Tunisia Arab Showcase Captagon Crisis</p> <p>World</p> <p>UK US Africa Asia Australasia Europe The Americas</p>	<p>Business</p> <p>Aviation Economy Energy Money Cryptocurrencies Property Banking Technology Markets Travel and Tourism Start-Ups Road to Net Zero Future Comment</p>	<p>Opinion</p> <p>Comment Editorial Obituaries Cartoon Feedback</p> <p>Lifestyle</p> <p>Fashion Food Motoring Luxury Family Home Wellbeing Things to do Comment</p>	<p>Arts & Culture</p> <p>Art Books Film Music On Stage Television Comment</p> <p>Travel</p> <p>Hotels News Airlines Destinations Responsible Tourism Covid-19 Travel</p> <p>Health</p> <p>Coronavirus</p>	<p>Sport</p> <p>Football Cricket IPL F1 UFC Golf Rugby Horse Racing Tennis Other Sport</p> <p>Weekend</p>	<p>Podca</p> <p>Trend East Beyo Heac Post Reco Busir Pock My 2 Seer Book</p>
--	---	---	---	--	---	---

[Terms & Conditions](#) [Sitemap](#) [Archive](#)