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Imagine a room covered with mattresses and flooded with hundreds of translucent balloons containing black-and-white photos of Palestine refugee children. From the ceiling are suspended dozens of barbed-wire halos. The walls are lined with white tulle, the material whose soft texture and faintly clean smell has nurtured in generations of babies a sense of security and calm.

The "viewers," or more accurately, "participants," are invited to stoop down, gather up each balloon, and cradle it in their arms as they peer through the see-through plastic at the image inside. The very act of stooping, cradling, studying and, in some sense, "protecting" is the concept - physical and emotional - that lies at the heart of this installation, "Homage to Childhood" by the celebrated artist Rana Bishara. The "participant," who must take care not to kick the balloons and drive them up into the barbed wire, is being invited to become part of this work, a living symbol of protection, nurture: an artistic act of solidarity and love. The symbolism does not end there. These children are in a bubble - homeless, stateless, and dispossessed.

"In this work," says Bishara, "children are trapped between halos of barbed-wire circles covered with tulle cloth and balloons. The spectator has to manoeuvre between the hung barbed-wire circles and interact with the artwork by walking through the space and discovering the pictures inside the transparent balloons, or by lying down on the mattresses and watching the barbed-wire circles conquer the space - a metaphor of simultaneous protection and harm. It is a malevolent halo that purposely crowns the children, Palestinian children, and steals their childhood, even before they are born."

This exhibition is the first in a series of events through which the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) will mark its 60th anniversary, which falls on 8 December 2009. As part of this series, UNRWA is digitising its archive of hundreds of thousands of still photographs and moving images. It is these photographs that are encased in the balloons.

"We at UNRWA are proud and thrilled to work with Rana, one of the most exciting young artists working here, and to allow her the opportunity to give this work its premier in the occupied Palestinian territory," said Christopher Gunness, UNRWA Spokesperson. "We are grateful to our friends at the French Cultural Centre for giving

us their space. This is not just an act of generosity; it recognises the sheer genius of Rana's work and its transforming power."

"Homage to Children," by Rana Bishara, opens at the French Cultural Centre in Jerusalem on 4 December 2008.