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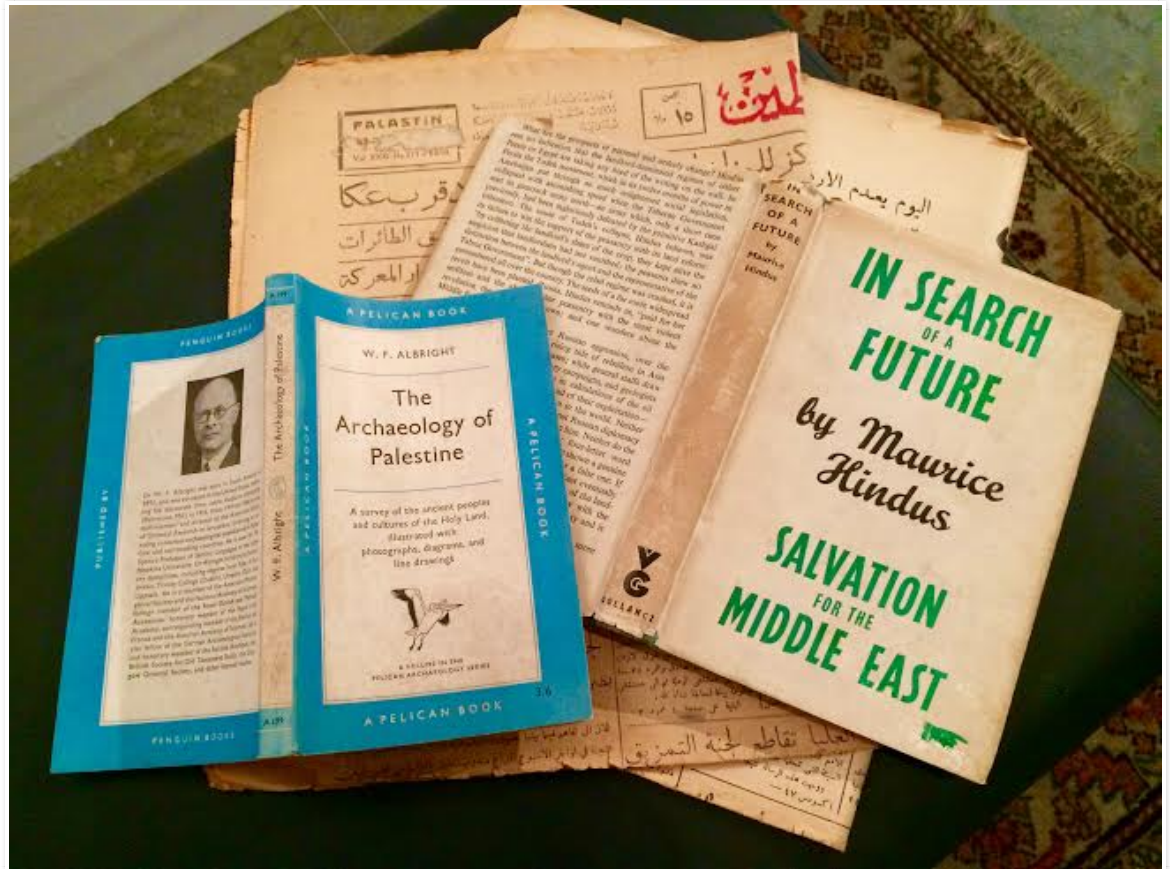
Utopian and Dystopian Palestines: From Literature to Art and Back at the 'Chapter 31' Exhibition

BY **MLYNXQUALEY** on **AUGUST 8, 2016** · (1)

"Chapter 31: A New Archaeology Of The Future"[1] is a new exhibition that tips its hat to Emile Habibi's pioneering text The Secret Life of Saeed The Pessoptimist. How can this be a springboard to imagining Palestinian utopias and dystopias?

By Sinéad Murphy

Chapter 31, subtitled 'An Odd Piece Of Research On The Many Virtues Of The Oriental Imagination,' offers the viewer an eclectic variety of utopian and dystopian images of future Palestine. Curated by the Sarha



Collective and opened on 4th August in P21 Gallery in Chalton St, London, the exhibition features a diverse assemblage of artists primarily from Palestine, Syria, and Jordan but also including contributors from Brazil, France, Kuwait, and Lithuania.

The prefatory comments in the exhibition's accompanying programme concede that "visualising the future required the use of more complicated narratives than we had originally anticipated"^[2] and certainly, this is evident in the extensive variety of artistic media deployed in exploration of the theme. Oscillating between melancholy, nostalgic conceptions of the past and macabre, often sardonic visions of the future, the exhibition conveys the ultimate precarity of social and political circumstances in contemporary Palestine.

For some of these artists, several of whom act as the subjects of their own work, the hardships depicted are far from abstract – Abdulrahman Katanani lives in Sabra refugee camp in Beirut, where he was born, while Anas AlBarbawari lives and works in Talbieh refugee camp in Jordan. The use of the physical space of the gallery, in which the description tags are placed in awkward, often dimly lit positions, prevents passive observation, and is perhaps a gesture to the challenging working conditions facing these artists. Confronted by obstacles from ongoing armed conflict, to internment, to power shortages, the very existence of some of these pieces is in itself an act of defiance, and of hope.

As with **Larissa Sansour's current exhibition *In The Future They Ate From The Finest Porcelain***, explorations of the role of architecture in creating and narrating ideas of nationalism, identity, and belonging underlie many of the pieces exhibited. METASITU Collective's short video installation *Tora Bora* is a particularly striking example; it deconstructs the process through which "holy Jerusalem stone" is quarried and commodified in Palestine. The corrupted and seemingly unregulated industry stands in distinct contrast to the otherwise heavily surveilled lives of Palestinians working in the quarries. The term Tora Bora — which refers to the pitted, uneven roads in the West Bank as well as to the dust produced by the quarrying — echoes repeatedly throughout the short film, sticking to the images as it does to the skin.

While the film is premised on a critique of the unequal relationship between Palestinian quarry workers and the Israeli companies involved, it communicates an essentially optimistic message. *Tora Bora* is posited as representing an intractable, physical connection between Palestinians and the land from which they are routinely displaced. This continuum between people and environment, and the appropriation of Tora Bora as an instrument of resistance, are borne out by graffiti shown in one of the film's final scenes, which reads "I will never let you go."

This articulation of resistance is one of many on display, but these are in contrast with expressions of loss, uncertainty, and oppression which populate the exhibition. No better is this tension exemplified than by Ayham Jabr's series of digital collages displayed on the ramp between the two floors. Depicting a journey from utopia to dystopia, or its reverse, the viewer's initial reading depends entirely on whether they travel up or down the ramp.

The theme of journeying is taken up in Yazan Khalili's slide show *Cracks Remind me of Roadkill*, a witty and incisive series which documents the lack of freedom of movement that continues to beset Palestinians in the Occupied Territories. In Khalili's piece, diary-like snippets of text are interspersed between images of damaged paving stones and with a bleakly comic tone, "The Question of Palestine"^[3] becomes questions *about* Palestine — what it is, where it is, and for some, if it *can* be. In many ways, the slide show illuminates what the organizers describe as an exasperation shared by all of the artists: the "feeling as though they always had to justify their worth — and, at times, their very existence — by reiterating their historical belonging to the land."^[4]

More sombre is Amjad Ghannam's painting "Forgotten in the Parallel Time," which communicates the experience of living under occupation, and which is accompanied by text written by political prisoner Waleed Nimer Duka. Originally six separate images then combined and obscured beyond recognition, Ghannam's painting suggests a vision of the future which for him is indistinct and chaotic.

In a related interpretation, Rafat Asad's disorienting painting "Eltifaf" ("bypass" in Arabic) depicts an alluring landscape almost entirely enveloped by an advertising billboard. The implication, contrary to the name of the piece, is that any viable vision of a future Palestine beyond occupation cannot rest on a nostalgic image of an idealized and resilient past, bypassing the difficulties of the present.

Hani Amra's series of six paintings, in which pairs of drones, missiles, and roadblocks are depicted in perfect symmetry, highlights the unsettling reality by which such articles of control and violence can become constituent of daily life in Palestine. Reaching the conclusion that "Rome was not built in a day," Basma Alsharif's short film *We Began By Measuring Distance* encapsulates the tension between utopia and dystopia, between despair and resistance, which characterises the exhibition as a whole.

The nod to Emile Habibi's pioneering text *The Secret Life of Saeed The Pessoptimist* in the exhibition's title^[5] is echoed by various elements of the exhibition, from the surrealist and satirical style of Anas AlBarbawari's superb stop-animation *Matar* (Arabic for rain) to the explicit reference in Alaa Abu Asad's photographic print "Evening Ennui With Mum on a Rainy Sunday." In the latter, a woman is depicted reading *Al Itihadd*, a Palestinian publication co-founded by Habibi in 1944. The programme's epigraph is also derived from *The Pessoptimist*, the quote signalling a central preoccupation of the exhibition — self-expression in the face of ongoing silencing and forced disappearance of Palestinians:

"But what about the secret I bear?" I asked. "Tell it to the world," he advised. "And that is what I am doing". ^[6]

^[1] Quoted from Liva and Eduardo of METASITU, exhibition programme p. 25.

^[2] Exhibition programme, Introduction, p.3.

^[3] See Said, Edward W, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Times Books, 1979)

^[4] Exhibition programme, Introduction, p.3.

^[5] The exhibition's name is derived directly from chapter 31 of Habibi's text. See Habibi, Emile, *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist*, trans. by Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Trevor Le Gassick (London: Arabia, 2010)

^[6] Ibid., p. 78.

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