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Artist portrait

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Khalil Rabah

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Displacement and Re-placement

Khalil Rabah is a Palestinian artist who lives and works in Ramallah. He was born in Jerusalem in 1961 and gained a BA in Fine Arts from the University of Texas, USA in 1991. He taught at the Department of Fine Art in Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem from 1997-2000. He has had numerous international solo shows and has shown at the Sao Paolo, Sydney, Kwanju and Istanbul Biennales. Rabah is also the co-founder of the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem. He utilises conceptual installation, video, photography and performance and incorporates materials emblematic of his Palestinian identity: olive trees, olive oil, stones, silk embroidery threads, soil and lentils.

The overriding themes of displacement and replacement, context and identity are at once a part of Rabah's personal history and that of his country. Through his engagement with the natural world these are extended into the wider ideas of man's relationship with nature and human suffering on a global scale. Also crucial to his method is the exploration of the epistemological means through which anthropology and natural history are apprehended by society and how the discourses of fact and fiction can be blended to create new meaning.

'my work involves different methodologies of de-constructing and intervening conceptually and physically with objects, the body, spaces and ideas to formulate new identities.'

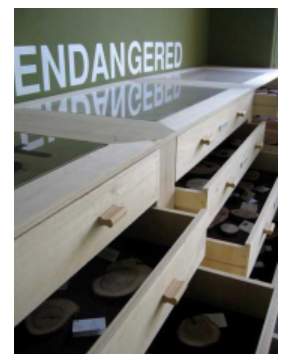
- Khalil Rabah

Rabah's most recent project 'The Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind' brings together these ideas in one organic, ever-changing piece. Complete with Geology and Palaeontology, Earth and The Solar System, Anthropology and Botanical sections, the museum comprises fossils, bones, meteorites and other artefacts displayed in vitrines and topological installations. Each specimen, meticulously crafted by Rabah, narrates the story

images



part of 'The Palestinian Museum'



of Earth from its geological formation to the time of man and the anthropological history that entails.

In her essay on the 2005 Istanbul Biennale, Cay Sophie Rabinowitz described the Museum: "The artist has given exhaustive attention to detail in both the crafting of individual elements and in the style of individual spaces. There are rooms with flat files full of catalogued and labelled tree branch slices, vitrines, maps, recorded expert testimony, and practically every manner of presentation one might expect to find in a natural history museum."

By arranging a collection of artefacts fashioned from iconic Palestinian materials in the style of the Western European museum, Rabah fashions a parallel history of his country. The Museum's significance with regard to Palestine is poignantly highlighted by the artist in an interview with Angela Serino at the Istanbul Biennale:

"there was a website, which I hope we can get hosted again: www.thepalestinianmuseumofnaturalhistoryandhumankind.org. It's the longest name. When someone said it's too long, I decided to count the letters. It turned out to be 48 letters. And when people learn that it is 48 letters, they get goosebumps, because in Palestinian history 48 is the year the state of Israel was established, and Palestine stopped existing in a way. And with this number I think I resolved it. There is a very personal, collective consciousness about this number. The number 48 for us Palestinians is the most important number you will ever learn in your life. When I discovered the title contains 48 letters in a way I started to have peace about what 48 can mean for me personally. It's not necessarily a disturbing thing anymore. It is something beyond what I was brought up to carry as baggage with me. Here I am getting into personal territory. 48 can mean something else. It can be something not necessary about the catastrophe, and we call it a catastrophe. The 48 catastrophe. OK, it is the number of letters in the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind."

Outside of the specific historical context of Palestine, the wider themes of displacement and replacement, identity and context are prominent in the rooms of the 'Museum'. Rabinowitz notes: "Styled according to the conventions of a different type of museum, Khalil Rabah's "Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind"...mimics and problematizes institutional displays of native culture, by presenting its subject, the olive tree, in the style of an Earth sciences collection... \sic Rabah's work recalls 19th Century World Fair exhibitions where African and Native American indigenous people were put into "authentically" staged settings to perform tasks presumed typical of their culture. These ethnographic displays treated human "others" like animals and thus represent the exhibition styles of zoological gardens rather than Natural History Museums. Every presentation of cultural material is subject to be framed by the place it is installed."

These themes are enacted at once in the glass-cased exhibits and in the wider artistic arrangements of the 'Museum' itself. At the Istanbul Biennale, Rabah displayed 'Palestine before Palestine' a show from the permanent collection from the 'Museum'. Rabah comments: "Here this Museum presents an exhibition, "Palestine before Palestine" from the permanent collection of the museum, which tells people that there is a museum with an established, permanent collection, and yet it only exists as an institution within an institution, in the transient event of the biennale. So there is a double positioning." That the curators of the exhibition moved its locus from the oldest part of the city to newer areas to extract it from any historical context adds a further dimension to this positioning.

Displacement is a recurrent, prominent theme in Rabah's work. In the tellingly titled "feeling (a)part" show at the Townhouse gallery in Cairo, Nigel Ryan observes: "First comes the olive tree, a real tree, lying on a surgically white glass table. It is a reasonably sized tree, though not large enough to droop over the edges of its sanitised plinth. The leaves confront you on entering the show. The roots, together with some dried earth, lie on the other side of the table. The roots remain: without them we would be exploring rootlessness; with them we are in the territory of the uprooted..."

part of 'The Palestinian Museum'



part of 'The Palestinian Museum'

Displacement is also explored through its constitutive elements, presence and absence. At the Istanbul Biennale, Rabah created a satellite island, situated outside the main event. The island was made-up from organic specimens taken from Palestine but as a space it could not be entered and only viewed from the outside. For the Biennale attendees in Istanbul, the specimens are present, but their very presence serves to highlight their absence from their indigenous context. Conversely, their inaccessibility for those in Istanbul acts as a form of absence, where once in Palestine they would have formed an unenclosed part of the landscape.

Presence and absence were also manifested again in '3rd Annual Auction of Wall Zone' performance exhibition in Ramallah. Organised through the 'Museum' Rabah held an auction of objects taken from the natural environment and surroundings of the dividing wall that has been erected between Israel and Palestine. The removal of the pieces by bidders suggests they have no presence in a place that has become a division, an absence. Rabah comments: "I was in Berlin three years ago. I was walking around and I saw the trace of the Wall. People selling these things. It was three years ago they started building the wall at home. What hit me was the absence of it. This presence can be absent. How do I deal with it? So then I said: I am going to sell the wall. I wanted to auction the wall because I didn't want it to be a natural institution where people paint on it. Let's sell it. Get rid of all of it. Who can do this? Oh, the Palestinian Museum of Natural History and Humankind is so concerned with endangered environments. It can do it! So the museum introduced the 3rd Annual Wall Zone Auction. The number refers to the years that they have been building the wall. In a sense, this becomes a means of narration a way of articulating certain poetic things."

In the 'Museum', Rabah also interrogates the manner in which a museum posits subjective discourses as objective historical fact. A museum's structure and format commands a belief that Rabah's method reveals to be unsubstantiated and so questions the received faith of our most trusted institutions. This is extended from the physical space of the museum into posters, flyers, a website and publications. At the Istanbul Biennale, Rabah invited Riwaq, an NGO for architectural conservation, based in Ramallah, to work in a section of his Museum. The move in itself is yet another displacement, but furthermore, by consciously blending a real organisation with his fabricated 'Museum', Rabah blurs the boundaries of fact and fiction, the real and unreal.

In feeling (a)part there is a different approach to fact. Nigel Ryan remarks: "On a plinth sits an open dictionary. The pages are nailed down, a forest of steel compacting the pages, covering every definition except one. Philistine: one who can neither appreciate art nor vulture, or words to that effect. Here is a total absence of equivocation." For Rabah, lack of equivocation or absolute faith in fact is only made available to those who have no art or culture.

In parallel to the destructive and displacing mechanisms employed by mankind on itself, Rabah also explores man's colonial attitude to nature. In this he demonstrates the mankind's irresistible dominion over the natural world, yet simultaneously how that world can continue in a passive defiance. Although a clear link to his country's history can be drawn here, Rabah is also raising his subject matter to the global stage.

In 'feeling (a)part' a video installation illustrates this idea. Ryan writes: "An olive lies on the ground then, thud, it is squashed by a stone. Thud, another olive squashed, and another, and another. The ant that crawls around the olive, an accident this of a felicitous fate...remain to reappear in a frame with another olive, and then another...It is relentless...The gallery reverberates with the thuds." Here the repeated destruction of the olives is unequivocal; the ant though diminutive in size is nevertheless a famously hardy insect, in this instance suggestive of strength and resistance.

In the 2000 'With Out Architecture' exhibition in Sienna, Rabah removed specific stones from within the city and brought in wild grass for the surrounding landscape to grow in the Medieval landscapes. Less violent than the video installation in 'feeling (a)part', these interventions again demonstrate another diminutive resistance, the natural world gently reclaiming its birthright

from human civilisation.

In the 'Museum' the nature is felt in the objects carved from olive trees but Rabah has also installed a seemingly incompatible series of photographs that he himself has claimed do not really "belong" with the collection. These were made, Rabinowitz notes "when he had an artist residency in Mozambique and discovered people living in the Moputo Zoo's cages. He confessed to still being bothered by his own attraction to and fascination with the situation. These squatters who lived willingly like Kafka's "Hunger Artist", comforted by the only protection they could fathom, so "captivated" the artist in residence that he offered them money if they let themselves be photographed."

The images are printed in a process referred to as a 'flip image' – two photographs layered over each other and visible through a serrated plastic surface. Visually they thus compel the reader to view the placement and replacement of man with nature; their seeming incongruousness with the rest of the Museum is an oblique metaphor for displacement. Again Rabah has opened up the personal history of the Palestinian people into a wider suffering, though this time human suffering is included alongside nature.

Rabah stated of the photographs: "I saw a story on CNN about people living in zoo cages in Mozambique. I thought: "Oh my god, and we think the Palestinians are really suffering? ...People actually rent lion cages because the situation is so bad. This was a shift in my life, my perspective."

In his work, Rabah explores many negative sides of human existence. But as with each theme of context and identity, displacement and replacement, man and nature, the negativity itself has a counterpoint. Taken together his works, and especially the ongoing project of the Museum, betray a resilient almost defiant optimism. Rabah compels his viewers to consider suffering and destruction, but by virtue of this he also suggests hope. In his own words:

"...wonder, curiosity and discovery, it's simply that...This is how we move things forward, and bring a new life to things."

Author: Stanley J Milan
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He has had numerous international solo shows and has shown at the Sao Paolo, Sydney and Kwanju Biennales. Rabah has undertaken various artist-in-residence programmes in Europe. In 2001, Khalil Rabah was awarded the Visiting Arts/Delfina Annual Fellowship and spent nine months working at Delfina Studios in London.

Rabah is also founder and Board member of the Al-Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem, set up in 1997.

Works

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VIDEO WORKS

Film / TV

1999 'My Body and Sole' - 8 mins, Beta, colour 1996 'a this and a that' - 40 mins, loop, VHS, colour

SOLO EXHIBITIONS (Selected)

Established

2004 'The Third Annual Wall Zone Sale', Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, Ramallah, Palestine 2002 'Copy Right', Samaha House, Beirut, Lebanon 2001 'Feeling a Part', Town House Gallery, Cairo 2000 'With Out Architecture', Le Repubbliche Dell'Arte, Siena, Italy 2000 'Khalil Rabah', Gallery Bangnai, Siena 1999 'a this and a that', Gallery Anadiel, Jerusalem 1999 'Nine Works', Khalil Sakakini Cultural Centre, Ramallah 1997 'On What Grounds', Gallery Anadiel, Jerusalem

GROUP EXHIBITIONS (Selected)

Established

2006 'Word into Art', British Museum, London 2006 'Mercury in Retrograde', De Apple, Amsterdam 2006 'Interrupted Histories', Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana 2005 9th Istanbul Biennale, Istanbul 2005 Nuove Acquisizioni, MACRO al Mattatoio, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma 2005 'Ten Artists Ten Years' Guest Atelier, Aarau, Switzerland 2005 '...O luna tu...ARCOS' Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Sannio, Benevento 2004 'Mediterraneans Arte Contemporanea', MACRO al Mattatoio, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma 2004 'Plug In', Centre for Contemporary Art Futura, Prague 2004 'Unscene', Greenwich University, London 2004 'Lust Lies Art and Fashion', Podewill, Berlin 2003 'Disorientation', Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt, Berlin 2000 'Narcisse blesse, autoportraits contemporains 1970-2000', Passage de Retz, Paris, France 1999 'Skin Deep, surface and appearance in contemporary art', Israel Museum, Jerusalem 1999 'The Change of the Century 1899-1999', Passage de Retz, Paris 1998 'I never promised you a rose garden', Beelden Buiten, Tiel, Belgium 1998 'Roteiros, Roteiros, Roteiros', XXIV Biennale de Sao Paulo, Brazil 1998 'Every Day', Sydney Biennial, Australia 1997 'Contemporary Palestinian Artists', Institut du Monde Arabe, Paris 1995 'Beyond the Borders', Kwangju Biennale, Kwangju, South Korea 1995 'Dialogues of Peace', UN, Geneva, Switzerland 1995 'Beyond the Borders', Kwangju Biennale, South Korea

Merits

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RESIDENCIES & FELLOWSHIPS

2001/02 Visiting Arts/Delfina Studios International Fellowship, London
1998 Curator in residence, Basis Wien, Vienna, Austria
1998 Artist in residence, Gastatelier, Aarau, Switzerland
1997 Artist in residence, Ecole des Beaux Arts, Cergy Pontoise, France

Projects

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This artist took part in the following project(s) organized/funded by the culturebase.net partner institutions.

Delfina International Fellowship 2001

(30 October 01 - 02 February 02)

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Darat Al Funun Foundation

www.daratafunun.org/main/resourc/exhibit/rabah/rabah.html
Artists pages