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## Nothing to Write Home About

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## Nothing to Write Home About

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**Keywords:** art, exhibition, Kuwait, Rana Sadik

Rana Sadik is one of the few non-native art collectors who creates and funds private initiatives like art-showcases and art-participatory scholarships towards education, conferences, workshops, and exhibitions in Kuwait. She provides participants with a comprehensive cultural and learning experience. Through art, she addresses territorial contraventions based on politics. The works in her intervention allude to dislocation, displacement, and voids left by immigrant populations, specifically in the Palestinian context. Sadik's recent intervention, *Nothing to Write Home About* (2018) at the KIPCO Mall in Kuwait, exhibits a comprehensive selection from her personal art collection (produced by seven global artists including: Mary Tuma, Emily Jacir, Sharif Waked, Jawad Al Malhi, Khalil Rabah, Tarek Al-Ghoussein, and Jeffar Khaldi).





Fig. 1: Rana Sadik, 'Nothing to Write Home About', 2018, KIPCO Mall, Kuwait.  
Courtesy of the collectors: Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Kuwait.

These works are fixed, not in a narrative, but in a subjective and corporal engagement of humankind. They symbolise the artists' involvement and allow them to contest and direct agonising memories rooted in *mêlée*, destruction, and restoration. The exhibits are organised in an open rectangular retail space with a glass front, so the spectator can view them clearly. In the central space Sadik suspends Mary Tuma's variant pieces of life-sized organs, *Internal Systems 3*. At the foot of the entrance she positions Emily Jacir's sculpture, *Embrace*, and on its left she places Sharif Waked's film, *Chic Point*. Further left, along the wall are aligned Tarek Al Ghousein's digital print, *K Files 273*, and Jawad Al Malhi's painting, *Child's Play*. Along the right side of the glass front are Khalil Rabah's sculptures, *Philistine* and *Half-Self-Portrait*. Further right, hanging on the wall is Jeffar Khaldi's painting, *Kill Them All*. The open glass-front in a public space of the mall enhances the audience interaction with this spectacle. In this manner, it can be viewed by everyday people, not only by spectators who view high art in the private space of an art gallery. The unrestricted assemblage of projects beckons circulating viewers day and night as it engages them in a stirring dialogue with the work. These artworks produce a disconcerting response, not embedded in sentiment but in the course of consciousness, in a nuanced yet undeviating approach. Sadik provokes spectators to relate with the work and decode it within their personal political,

social, and historical contexts. The title *Nothing to Write Home About* describes voids constructed by dislocation and displacement in relation to relegated communities (their disappearance from history).



Fig. 2: Mary Tuma, *Internal Systems 3*, Poly satin ribbon, fabric, masking tape, yarn, foam, fiber reactive dye, acrylic, plumb bobs, 13' x 24' x 6' (dimensions variable), 2008. Courtesy of the collectors: Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Kuwait.

In the exhibition space, Sadik strategically positions Mary Tuma's mixed-media sculpture, *Internal Systems 3* (2008), the third series of installations made of several crocheted body organs. It demonstrates how Tuma moves her emphasis from the exterior to the interior operative of her body. Tuma's firmly-crocheted, reconstructed organs, in a constricted fleshy palette, droop from the ceiling. They illuminate the traumas of the inner human corpus,

and more specifically express the 2000-01 internal and external Middle Eastern shocks. 'The individual parts float like her emaciated garments, spare but fundamentally interconnected, baring pieces of her soul at the same time they are left in limbo for the mind to wear'.[1] Tuma delivers a single stitch network of less than 100 crocheted internal organs (fewer than those created for *Internal Systems 1 and 2*). In a very revelatory manner she voices diverse feelings in the form of organic shapes. Bared as a naked, exposed structure, Tuma fashions a permeable and leaky exchange between the inner and outer areas of humans, walls, and borders, connecting vacant galleries and caves as she produces an unguarded, accessible, and anticipative space for envisaging. 'The installation format allow[s] for infinite changes and relationships between parts, ... by building in the potential for change and allow[ing] viewers to move through the piece rather than simply view it from outside'.[2] Transgressing the borders of the social and political, the project bares the motion of human flesh and blood to display the history of Palestinian dislocation and body politics. Deconstructed into its components, the form develops a discourse between remnants and re-enactments, and the far-reaching prospective of empty spaces. The work reveals loss, refers to the passing of time, to the empty space within a once complete form, and to an identity that is a fragment of the milieu. In this indefinable space, the body turns into an expressive landscape; it defines the space as both real and surreal, sombre as well as comical.

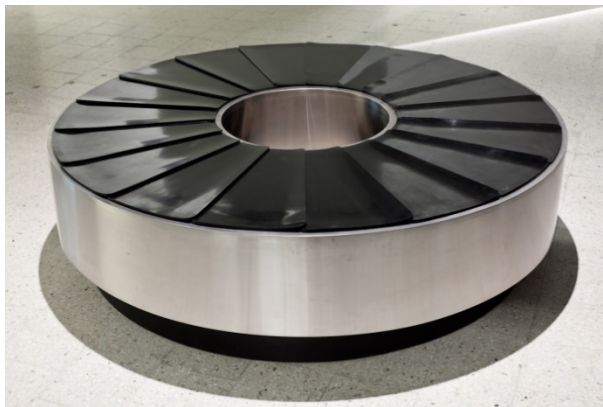


Fig. 3: Emily Jacir, *Embrace*, rubber, stainless steel, aluminium, motor and motion sensors, 50 x 179 cm diameter, 2005. The conveyor belt (similar to a baggage claim belt) turns when somebody approaches it. Courtesy of the collectors: Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Kuwait.



At the foot of the entrance is Emily Jacir's *Embrace* (2005). It is a low rounded podium, similar to an unyielding airport luggage carousel. The sculpture reacts to the participant and moves when approached, representing her body being locked in a senseless circular movement between history, politics, and law and marking the refugee's journey as never-ending. The coiled, self-contained cycle lacks any serviceable function and turns ineffectually, with no prospect of any visible 'bags'. *Embrace* 'is commonly read as a metaphor for the claustrophobia and cyclical futility of the Palestinian condition, but it is also an intimate, highly formalist self-portrait, the diameter of the belt measuring [179 cm] the length of Jacir's own body'.<sup>[3]</sup> The viewer experiences feelings of anticipation, transposition, dislocation, and the notion of not arriving; it is about survival in occupied territories, with minimal-existence in the diaspora. Jacir's work demonstrates her personal history and cultural exchange in the Middle East. It reveals silenced histories of colonialism and displacement and displays global time as static.



Fig. 4: Sharif Waked, *Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints*, Video, 7:00 minutes, 2003. Courtesy of the collectors: Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Kuwait.

To the left of *Embrace*, on the floor, is Sharif Waked's *Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints* (2003). This seven-minute film considers, visualises, and questions, as it 'puts together two contradictory worlds in a powerful reflection on aesthetics, the body, humiliation, surveillance, and chosen as opposed

to forced nudity’.[4] It presents handsome young Palestinian men fast-treading to the sound of weighty beats, and swerving on the catwalk towards the Israeli checkpoint at West Bank and Gaza, wearing ‘the latest in checkpoint fashion’.[5] Buttons, hoods, zippers, and woven nets help expose the flesh of the men’s chests, abdomens, and lower backs, through splits, peekholes, and gaps in fashion garments that simultaneously follow yet question the fashion canons. ‘The world of high fashion is an interlocutor for the stark reality of imposed closure’.[6] The Palestinian’s body, frequently implied as a threat, is exposed to the spectator’s gaze in the flesh. Palestinians are forced to strip themselves for cross-examination and embarrassment at Israeli checkpoints. *Chic Point* discloses the politics of the gaze. It repositions the Palestinian’s body from being the victim of a soldier’s gaze, to an object of desire, as aware of his desirability. The interaction demonstrates an association with a lethal national encounter wrapped in hetero-normative sexual readings of masculinity and its absence.



Fig. 5: Tarek Al-Ghoussein, *K Files 473*, digital print, 60 x 90 cm, 2013. Courtesy of the collectors: Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Kuwait.

On the left wall is Tarek Al-Ghoussein’s *K Flies 473* (2013), one of a series of eight ‘performance-based photographs’.[7] Al-Ghoussein pictures himself dramatically at the site of Kuwait’s first attempt at offshore oil drilling, Umm Al Gaz, with the famous water towers spearing through the expanse of the horizon. He describes his work as, ‘not [being] about [him], [but] about a figure or a person, an actor in a scene [as] it explores the identity of the land and how we define ourselves through the landscape’.[8] This isolated, unsettled,

silent observer, lost in a ruined setting, is severed from a sense of home or belonging, questioning his historical reality as, 'explosive, instantaneous, distinct – a chance to see in a photograph not narrative, not history, but possibly trauma'.[9] His work questions (mis-)representation, (mis-)portrayal, (mis-)identification, and (dis-)location, as it explores the identity of the land and the isolation and limitation of the human identity within a changing landscape.

Further left of *K-Files* is Jawad Al Malhi's painting *Child's Play* (1988). As viewers standing on an undefined landscape, seeing 'from a distance' the scene of the 'other' continuously intrigues us. Multifaceted suggestions of communal materialisations can be seen in stoic and grounded figures, coated on encrusted layers of burlap sacks of sugar and flour, exposed as restricted and unsteady.[10] The painting visibly explores the acquisitive and frenzied nature of the space of the encampment in the specificity of the location, as it addresses the global concern of enforced change on people. The work emphasises how the strength of the unanimity of the community is fragmented by the anxieties and demands of everyday life that modify relationships. It underlines that 'identity – both personal and projected – does not remain fixed but remains in a constant state of transformation both in form and in action'.[11] As Laclau and Zac note,

an act of identification is not purely a submissive act on the part of the subject who would passively incorporate all the determinations of the object. On the contrary, the act of identification destabilizes the identity of the object [12]

created by the artist on his canvas. Therefore, the act of identification as 'Palestinian' and the task of validating Palestine in a space that fosters negotiation and debate make 'claims to self-determination an over-determining'[13] factor in issues of national identity.

An artist's urge to serve the nation makes this truer in the realm of visual arts, when artists like the ones exhibited in Sadik's intervention employ cultural metaphors to re-create past readings to serve the existent present-day politics. These artists embody, approach, and present their national identity based on their views of the past and anticipative effects on the present, through the lens shaped by displacement and deprivation. These uneven interventions are not just expressions of resistance by primeval commonalities, or just passive constructs by a victimised people towards a show of belonging and self-identity. In fact, they accentuate the wavering landscape and narrative of the Palestinian past, and work as tools of agency, of intervention, of



disruption, and of 're-creating' (creating new or confirming old) power interactions, towards a new meaning of nationalist self-identity. 'The creative powers of resistance structures bodies, spaces, places and the relations between them'[14] and displaces the identity of the object in their work. Over time resistance turns into communal practice and further into a larger discourse, which works towards envisaging change and development as part of an act of identification.

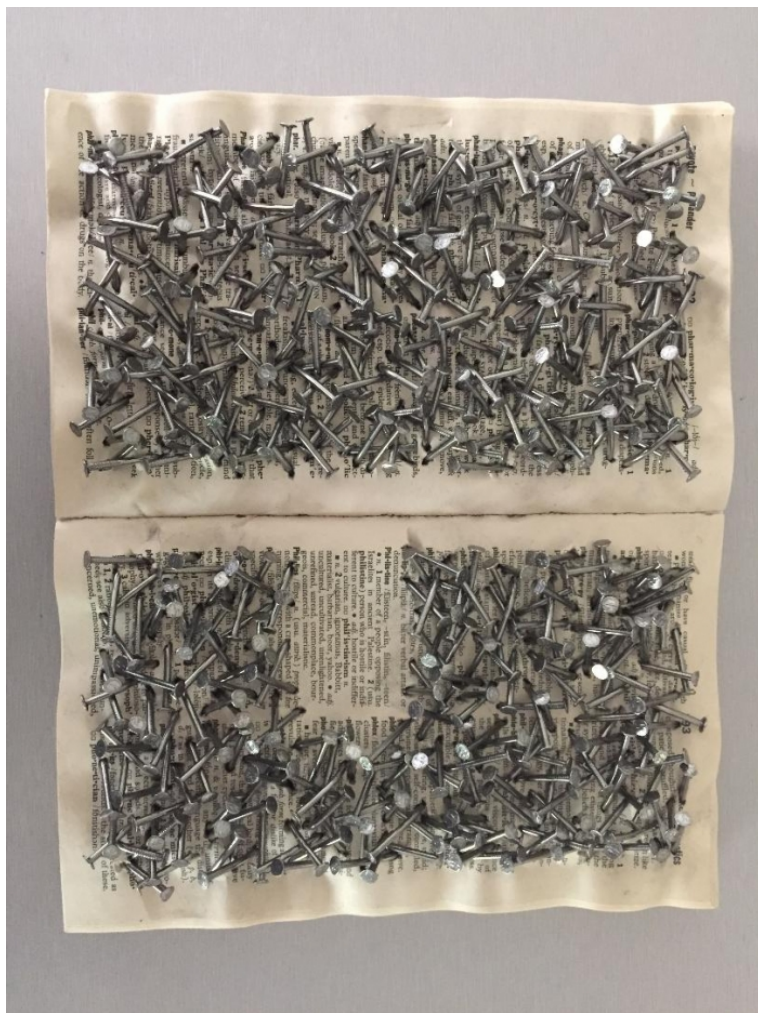


Fig. 6: Khalil Rabah, Philistine, Oxford Desk Dictionary, thesaurus and nails, 17.4 by 22.5 by 3.5 cm, 6 3/4 by 8 7/8 by 1 1/4 in, 4 from an edition of 4 plus 1 artist's proof, 1997. Courtesy of the collectors: Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Kuwait.

On the right wall is Khalil Rabah's sculpture *Philistine* (1997). Crudely embedded nails flashing across the surface of an open Oxford English Dictionary emphasise the definition of the exposed word Philistine as:

n.1. Member of a people opposing the Israelites in ancient Palestine. 2 (usu. Philistine) person who is hostile or indifferent to culture. 2. n. vulgarian, ignoramus, Babitt, materialist, barbarian, boor, yahoo; adj. uncultured, unenlightened, unrefined, unread, commonplace, bourgeois, commercial, materialistic. [15]

Rabah's work perceptibly questions the concepts of naturalisation, citizenship, and identity. The description indicates issues of deportation, relocation, and dislocation, and addresses migration and refuge, also homecoming. It 'demonstrate[s] the deep rootedness of rhetorical violence, [and] reveals the physical impact of systemic vehemence'. [16] The emphasised 'Philistine' explores the challenges of complex historical and lived experiences, subsequently resulting in combined agony. Rabah's visual representation shows, as Bhabha states,

[r]emembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a put together of the dismembered past, to make sense of the trauma of the present. [17]

It retains both the effect and the imprint of pain inflicted on the body in the present, and its connection with the past. The wounded materiality of the text describes the portrayed and dis-located body as mutilated and enervated. As is frequently presented by contemporary visual media, an art experiential has the power and the means to rouse empathy towards ostracised populations. Researchers endeavour to demonstrate how art can evoke compassion and stimulate both individual and collective pursuits by communicating the lived practices of relegated communes, particularly refugees. [18]

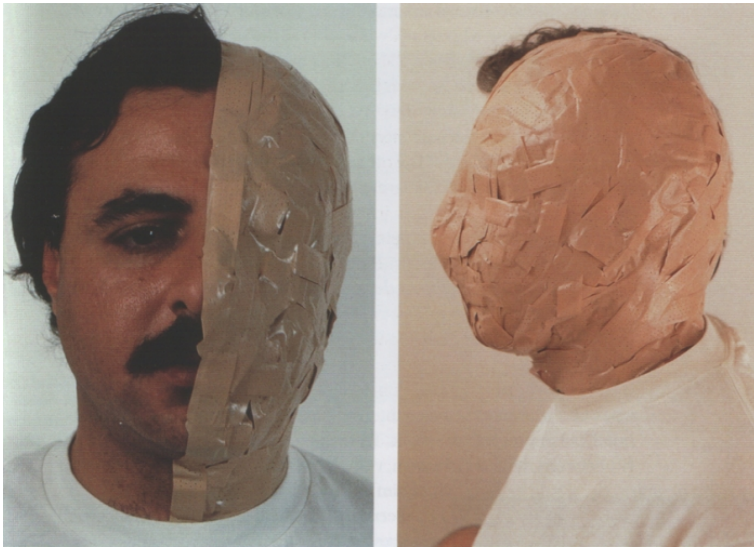


Fig. 7: Khalil Rabah, *Two Half-Self-Portraits*, 1997. Courtesy of the collectors: Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Kuwait.

Paired with *Philistine*, and based on the theme of racial inequality, Sadik presents Rabah's *Half-Self-Portrait* from his 1997 photography series. The photograph of Rabah's physically split half-natural face stereotypically personifies his political and economic inferiority. At the same time, his half-plaster-tone face embodies intense bodily distress, 'a sharp expression of inner fragmentation'[19] through his clichéd racial and religious identity. His autobiographical, physical manipulation of his 'trite' Palestinian face towards a fragmented identity and a 'broken' people are a pointed reference to self-identity, socially and politically-constructed racial inequality, and prejudice.

Further right on the wall, Sadik arranged Jeffar Khaldi's large-scale canvas, *Kill Them All* (2007). Displayed in incoherent Arabic font, the work documents the mass murder of unarmed Iraqis. This was established during an inquiry of American soldiers' alleged extensive massacre in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 conducted by the military 'defense attorney CPT Sasha Rutizer in the closing moments of the Article 32 hearing'.[20] The symmetrically balanced composition combines overpowering detail with theatricality, on a smoothed perception of space. It integrates both the traditionally-rooted Persian calligraphy with Henri Rousseau's inspiration of the 'beauty and honesty in the dark side'.[21] The suave echo of the calligraphy text deceives the viewer into seeing custom practise until she/he is absorbed in the detail, difference, and depth in meaning of the script used by the artist. Punitive realism mixed with

fictional scenes, the real mystified with the surreal in his work confront the observer and produce passion. Fortified with sentiments, reminiscence, and sardonic hilarity, his project questions the prejudiced, scheming, and disguised media reports that hide the truth. He recommends that it is 'people [that should] remove this blindfold'.<sup>[22]</sup> His work alerts the viewers to be interrogative and to make cognizant decisions about historic and present-day socio-political concerns that form their identity and affect their future.



Fig. 8: Jeffar Khaldi, *Kill Them All*, oil on canvas, 230 cm x 260 cm, 2007.  
Courtesy of the collectors: Rana Sadik and Samer Younis, Kuwait.

These artists deconstruct the typecast of identity and the concept of the everyday to un-publicise the publicised, and thereby demolish the stereotype of everyday people. They effectively create flux as they expose the horror of displacement, disorientation, and dislocation brought upon their occupied homeland. The seven different artists in Sadik's intervention are a case in point of what John Peter Berger more broadly observes as regards to Palestinian art, as they show 'people whose identity and land have been annexed and denied for at least three generations, the struggle to preserve and celebrate their identity takes many forms'.<sup>[23]</sup> The artists' re-creation of the history of people and objects immersed in reality and rootedness arouses the consciousness of the audience towards the vehemence and instability of the colonised. Accordingly, the objects of these artists' representations, the subjects of their painted landscapes are destabilised. Their social and, consequently, political identities are constructed based on their mutual, interactive role-play on the canvases and other materials. Borrowing again from Berger, they demonstrate that '[t]here are the visual arts, all of them, which, because they are vivid and visual, are able to dress, adorn, embroider, veil and disclose

that identity'.[24] Their assemblage and re-assemblage remains fluid, thereby maintaining the fluidity in their identity, in organisation, and in the act. Emboldened by her engagement with art, and based on a scholarly discourse, Sadik augments the cultural and social life of the communities of which she is a part. She shares her acquisitions with a larger public, an approach that allows her to connect history with human identity, and smudge borders between private and public. Accordingly, she plays a significant role and directs her viewers towards identity and community building, and therefore nation formation.

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## Notes

- [1] South Eastern Center for Contemporary Art 2011-12, p. 14.
- [2] Tuma 2018.
- [3] Wilson-Goldie 2015.
- [4] Waked 2018.
- [5] Hochberg 2015.
- [6] Waked 2005.
- [7] Al-Ghoussein 2018.
- [8] Ibid.
- [9] Baer 2005, p. 11.
- [10] Sherwell 2014.
- [11] Jadallah 2012.
- [12] Ernst Laclau 1994, p. 14.
- [13] McDonald 2013, p. 284.
- [14] Ibid., p. 285.
- [15] Oxford English Dictionary 1884.
- [16] Jadallah 2012.
- [17] Bhabha 1994.
- [18] For further readings please see: Kamal Boullata, 'Artists Re-Member Palestine in Beirut', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Summer 2003), pp. 22-38; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 215; Elaine McGregor and Nora Ragab, *The Role of Culture and the Arts in the Integration of Refugees and Migrants*, UNU-MERIT: European Expert Network on Culture and Audiovisual (EENCA), 15 February 2016; Zoé Cavnar-Lewandowski and Kelsey Gavin, 'The Potential of Refugee Art to Inspire Empathy and Social Action', 2017, *LMU/LLS Theses and Dissertations*, p. 299, <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/etd/299>; Roland Bleiker, David Campbell, Emma Hutchison, and Xzarina Nicholson, 2013, *The Visual Dehumanisation of Refugees*, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 48. 10.1080/10361146.2013.840769, Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937, oil on canvas, 349 cm × 776 cm. (Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid).
- [19] Ankori 2009, p. 182.
- [20] Meštrović 2009, p. 37.
- [21] Khaldi 2018.
- [22] Ibid.
- [23] Berger 2009, p. 23.
- [24] Ibid.