

PALESTINIAN *through* THREE EYES



Mohammed
Joha. Housing
#08. 2017.
Collage on
paper. 35x50cm.

El Beit at Dubai's **Tabari Artspace** gallery tackled the identity, loss, displacement and conditions of contemporary Palestinians through the perspectives of Hazem Harb, Mohammed Joha and Sliman Mansour, writes Katrina Kufer

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aliha Tabari, founding director of the recently rebranded Tabari Artspace (formerly known as

Artspace Dubai), has been planning a meaningful Palestinian exhibition for some time. Striving to evoke a sense of nostalgia by taking viewers on a journey that spans media as well as generations, *El Beit* brings together painting, photography and sculpture through the hands of Palestinian artists Hazem Harb, Mohammed Joha and Sliman Mansour. “We wanted to facilitate a dialogue between two generations of artists to offer an understanding of artistic practices and view points in Palestine today,” she says, “to push the message out further because the Palestinian story resonates in every Arab home.”

Harb and Joha embody the younger version of Palestinian artistic production that addresses memory and identity, a concept embedded within their realities, while Mansour, a Modernist, “witnessed the country in its heyday,” notes Tabari, herself of Palestinian heritage. “He tries to preserve these memories through art in order for younger generations to access and learn from them.” Works hang throughout the exhibition in dense clusters and a display table in the centre, never resting alone, dialoguing with each other through subdued colours, sharp angles and an emphasis on social traces on land. Combined, there is an oscillating tension: part documentation, part nostalgic recollection. The colder formal qualities and underlying realities allow content that is unavoidably human.

Harb’s characteristic architectural collages were inspired by a lake in Tiberias, a sacred body of water in an area that held significance for Palestinians until the 1936-39 Arab revolt. Preoccupied with architecture and destruction, Harb thought, “How and when does architecture cease to be an oppressive apparatus? How can sculpture counter architecture? How can sculpture be non-monumental?” Mixing archival images usually sourced from archives spanning 1820 to the post-British period and occupation, along with family pictures and self-taken photographs, he added cardboard and coloured paper for the framed works. However, the space is dominated by a centrally installed monochromatic archival image of a sitting room flanked by green walls. Refusing to objectify private spaces, Harb likewise avoided acting as documentarian: “I belong to a generation of Palestinian artists who challenge this, who believe that the media has subjected Palestinians to external narratives.” Focusing on examining and laying bare structures and apparatuses of power and hierarchy, Harb’s lightbox and photographic works are compounded by his separate dangling installation of thin rolled mattresses—a looming threat, or “connoting the act of slumber of political passivity,” he asserts. Asking what truly binds and holds people together through visual tools of infrastructure, his cutting techniques indicate ruin, whether the violence is enacted upon architecture, or its metaphorical representation as the body.

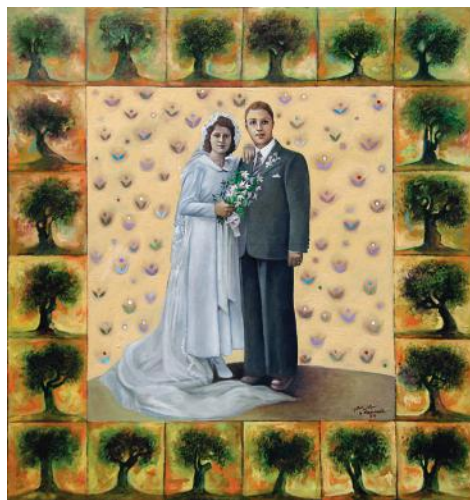
Originating from the same region, idea and tradition, Joha likewise explores identity and memory through conditions of childhood, the loss of innocence and notions of freedom resulting from the physical and psychological barriers imposed by conflict. Typically known for

painting, El Beit presents 14 collage works on paper depicting the devastation of fictional and remembered Palestinian homes, referencing the infrastructural destruction that fundamentally altered the Palestinian landscape. “Collage helped me express the true nature of abandoned houses so common in Palestine,” he says. Using diverse fabric, textiles and papers, the multilayered compositions reflect intimacy, vulnerability and, Joha adds, “home.” His abstraction forces viewers to go beyond literal representation and consider Joha’s research into visual and verbal testimonies where firsthand experience meets imagination, resulting in pieces that read as both and resonate with a distinctly human essence. “My driving force is the opposition to 70 years of occupation and violence in my homeland, combined with a passionate wish to expose the Palestinian people’s suffering and hardship.”

While Joha’s works address structural changes on land, “Hazem’s depict historic locations, and Sliman uses clay and mud, which brings tangible dimension to the exploration of Palestinian land and home,” he says. *El Beit* translates to “feel at home”, and Mansour’s Modernist paintings depict domestic realities. *Girl in the Village* shows a woman in a traditional thobe to incite sentimentality, and *Father and Mother on their Wedding Day* features parents framed by olive trees, a symbol of nationality. Mansour, the only artist who still resides in Palestine, works with organic, local materials such as mud, henna and clay as a result of his founding the New Visions movement following the 1987 Intifada and the boycotting of Israeli-imported supplies. The ensuing *Ten Years in Mud* series exemplifies, Tabari asserts, “The land and its people, the cracks from the drying process illustrating the passage of time.”

The works in *El Beit* rebuild and reimagine a now inaccessible homeland. Harb sums it up best. “Although the end products are aesthetically pleasing, I am more concerned with the concept and content. Over time, I’ve felt the responsibility of being an artist and what I could do through my art. What was the message and purpose? I found the driving force to work with Palestinian history and archives, and to repurpose history from a different point of view,” he says. Hoping to achieve justice in the fabricated stories, Harb speaks for all three when he adds, “To address the memories of many Palestinian families who were forcibly displaced, there is a deliberate blurring of the Palestinian collective memory. It is my responsibility as an artist to achieve a small part of the reinvestigation of the past, to be part of the present, and the future.” ■

El Beit runs until 8 March 2018. Tabariartspace.com



Above: Sliman Mansour. *Father and Mother on their Wedding Day*. 1984. Oil on canvas. 92x85cm. Above: Hazem Harb. *Tebariya #02*. 2017. Collage on fine art paper. 105x80cm.



Installation view of *El Beit*. Photography by Hazem Mahdy

