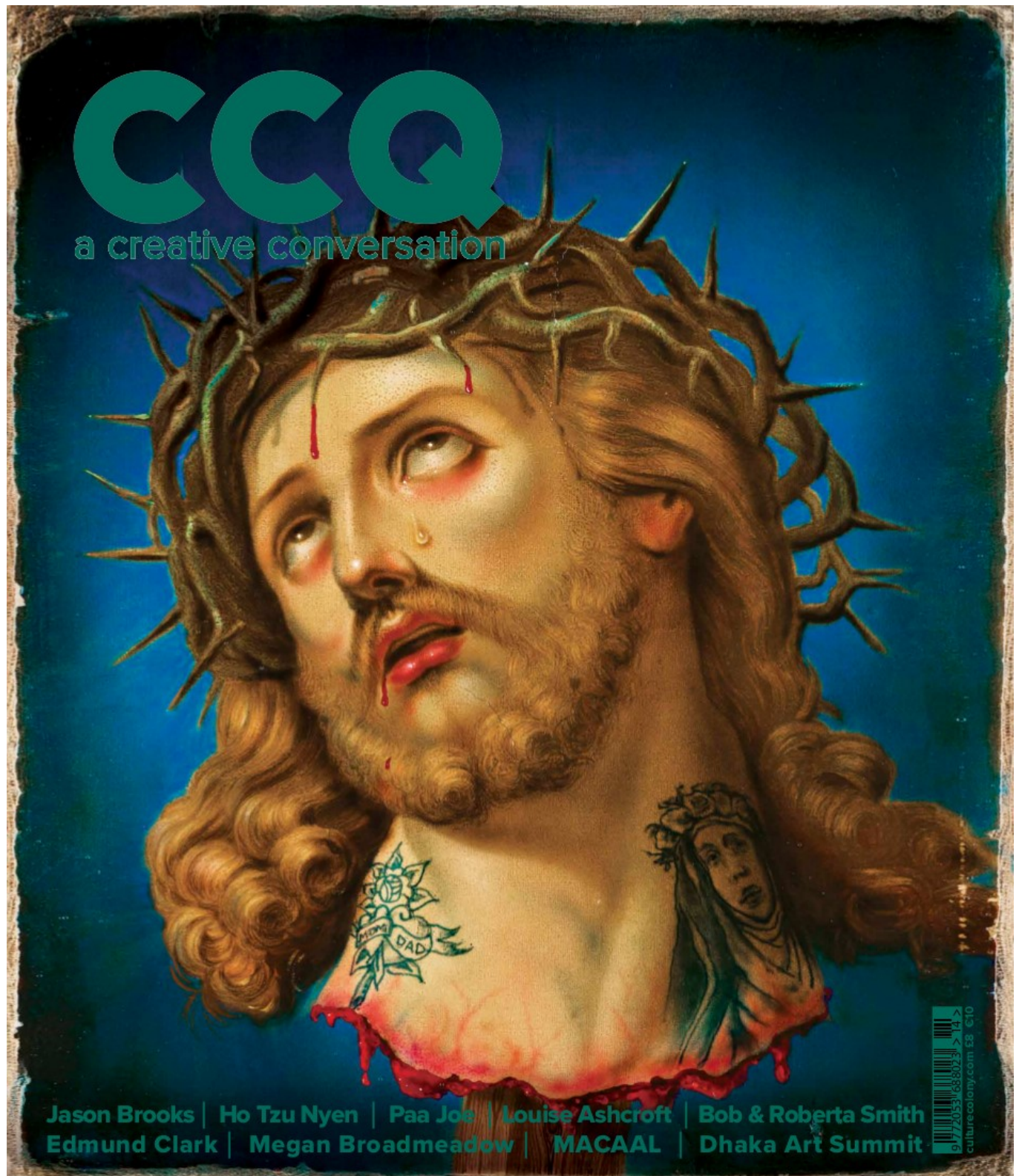


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The Shape of Memory

Earlier this year, *El Beit*, an inter-generational exhibition at Tabari Artspace, in the United Arab Emirates, showed younger artists, Hazem Harb and Mohammed Joha alongside septuagenarian modernist, Sliman Mansour. Rhiannon Lowe talked to Harb and Joha about how their work reflects the situation in Palestine and how personal and collective memory resonate throughout their work.

Rhiannon Lowe: Can you tell me how the exhibition came about, and how you became involved?

Hazem Harb: The idea of *El Beit* was conceived by the team at Tabari Artspace, who wanted to initiate an exchange between two generations of artists. Sliman Mansour, one of the most prominent modern Palestinian artists, Mohammed and I have created a dialogue, presenting different experiences. Mohammed and I have been drawing together since 1995. We have a long history of teamwork, and have participated in many group exhibitions.

Mohammed Joha: Hazem and I grew up together in the same neighbourhood, in Gaza. Since our childhood, we have often used the same art studio and shared many experiences that have helped us to develop our art over the years.

RL: Has Sliman's work been of particular inspiration or influence for you?

HH: Sliman's work has had a powerful emotional impact on both of us. The inclusion of his art alongside our contemporary works gives the show a holistic character.

MJ: I have never met Sliman in person: when I was a child, I read the magazine *Palestine Revolution* and saw reproductions of Sliman's artworks, which impressed and affected me very much. Tabari Artspace has created a context for rich cultural dialogue.

RL: Hazem, can you tell me more about the works you have in the show?

HH: Over the past few years, I have developed a multi-faceted practice, working with painting, video, drawing, sculpture and installation. My work is centred on examining and laying bare structures and apparatuses of power and hierarchies. I've been preoccupied lately with questions around architecture and destruction: how and when does architecture become an oppressive apparatus? How can sculpture counter architecture? How can sculpture be non-monumental?

For *El Beit*, I produced a series of collage works on paper, using different materials, inspired by the lake in the city of Tiberias, in the occupied north of Palestine, from which its Palestinian occupants were forcibly expelled. The lake in Tiberias has long been considered a sacred area that holds significance for Palestinians, as the city was, until the 1936–1939 Arab revolt, an important centre for decades. The lake is an area of water between Galilee and the historical Golan, on the northern part of the Jordan River. After 1948, the city of Tiberias changed radically, due to the Israeli occupation of Palestine, especially where the settlers lived. They demolished Arab neighborhoods, planted gardens, built tourist hotels, colonies and modern buildings, destroying the vibrant Arab life and development.

The lake is a central motif; the collages are a combination of re-photographed archive images of the lake and my own photographs. The works evoke nostalgic recollections of the city and raise questions about the forced destruction of a lost archive. I have also installed an enlarged archive photograph – depicting a domestic interior – in a section of the gallery, transforming it into a space reminiscent of a Palestinian home.

RL: Mohammed, your work in this show seems very different from earlier paintings and collages you've done. It appears to be more abstract, design-led, less based on a specific narrative than other works. They are almost pretty, and at odds with their subject matter, which makes them all the more pertinent.

MJ: Making this work, I composed representational scenes with expressive lines and areas, simplifying the subject and condensing the message. It is not descriptive but symbolic; behind the work is the brutal erasing of a place and the wiping out a population, along with its related culture and collective memory. I didn't move away from the narrative, but rather analysed it in depth and from different sides. My works are not a simple mirror of the material world; they try to transcend real elements to find an essence of life – love, humanity, beauty and sensitivity. Nothing is random or left to chance.

RL: What are the materials you use? Is it important where they are sourced from?

MJ: The choice of materials depends on the project. I use acrylic or oil paint in my paintings; clay and textiles for my installations/sculptures; fabrics and paper for my collages. It is not important for me where the material comes from; instead I focus on how I can transform these materials to transmit my concept most effectively.

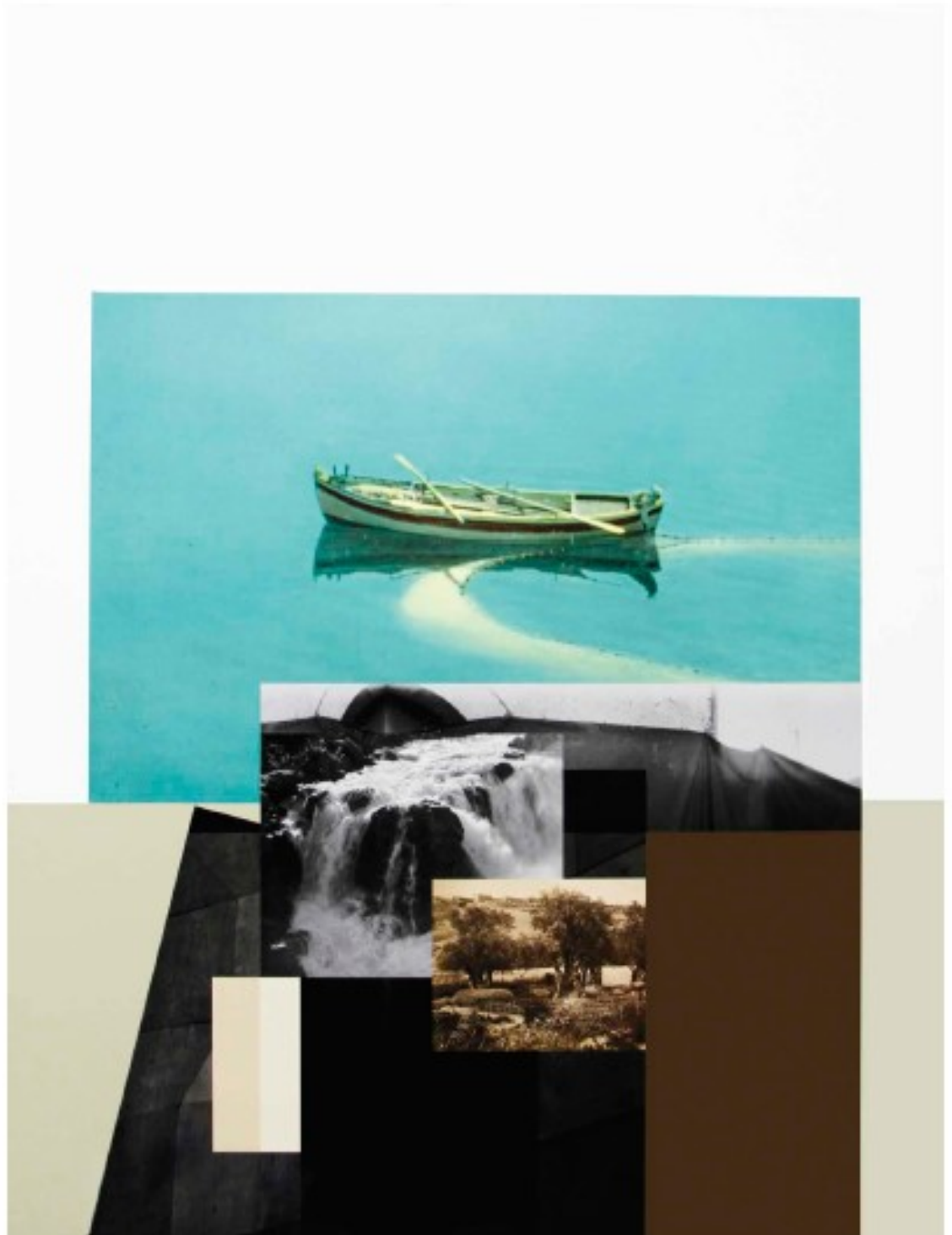
RL: Hazem, how does your work in the show fit with the rest of your practice?

HH: My practice started in Gaza at the YMCA, the only place in the territory where you could train and make art. I began with figurative painting and sculpting, and quickly moved to photography. In particular, I was looking at archives – my family's remaining images of ancestors. I received a scholarship to study in Paris, by which time archive photography formed an integral part of the way I worked and was key to exploring questions of memory, identity, self and historiography.

My sculptural work is an extension of this exploration – responding to emotive questions that the photographs propose. I juxtapose archival photographs with sculptures incorporating tough, sturdy construction materials, like concrete slabs, cement bricks and glass sheets – building materials of interior walls and facades, and the infrastructural elements in our private and daily lives, which supposedly offer shelter, support and protection, until of course, they collapse.

In one work, *This is not a Museum*, I used sharp geometric shapes, referencing the building blocks of colonialism and, in particular, Israel's modernist use of right angles and meticulously streamlined structures. I use domestic, personal signifiers, such as a mattress or a pillow which, when placed within the context of the rickety concrete, point at the bare and harrowing reality of Palestinian life: a vicious cycle of destruction and re-construction; an impermanence of identity, and space, which changes with each successive Israeli invasion.





RL: You often seem to write proposals about your work, which appear on your website. Is your writing an integral part of your work?

HH: Writing has been a hobby of mine from early on; I remember writing poetry as a child. I developed this over time and started writing my work concepts as part of the work.

RL: Mohammed, as both you and Hazem note in your writing, much of the western knowledge and experience of Palestine is through the media – a particular window if you like. We imagine horror without beauty, I suppose, fear without resilience. Does your writing accompany your paintings?

MJ: There is a huge difference between a personal experience, made in a real life context, which the artist translates into an artwork, and a mediated remote experience. Most westerners who visit Palestine are shocked, because they have never imagined the brutal, inhuman conditions under which we are forced to live. Sometimes, there are several means necessary to understand a certain topic, or to penetrate an artwork. In this sense, the writings are helpful but not necessary.

RL: You are mixing memory with observation in these pieces – is your work an attempt at trying to hold on to your memories?

MJ: Even if the topics are sometimes directly connected to my childhood, they are all part of the collective memory of the Palestinian people, who stand in the foreground.

RL: Can you talk more about collective memory? I feel individual memories come through more readily in artwork, and perhaps people are more sympathetic to them, finding a way to connect; they can be harder to quash too. A collective memory withstands many more readings and interpretations, but is, as you suggest, susceptible to change, erasure, fabrication. Are you trying to reclaim and cement a collective memory?

MJ: I try to build and elaborate on the collective memory which is composed of multiple points of view and many different cases, taking into account the people, their stories and sufferings, images and so on; it is more difficult to do than just using your own personal memory.

RL: Hazem, is it important for you to exhibit your drawings as part of your process of making work?

HH: I was originally a painter and an architectural designer. I still draw daily and everything in my work is a result of pencil drawing. This is the process from which all of my art originates. In fact, I don't always render the works in painting. Many of my drawings in notebooks are on display in this exhibition.

RL: Earlier, you said that the archive you worked with was destroyed.

HH: As the wars continued, the occupying soldiers realised that the forcibly displaced Palestinian homes had not only furniture, musical instruments, water pipes and carpets, but also books. There was a document about collecting books and pictures from abandoned neighbourhoods in Jerusalem, carried out by the National Library and the Archives of Pictures, between May 1948 and March 1949. All the images used in my work are from the various Palestinian areas that were occupied in 1948 and earlier; most are from 1920 to 1940.

I have my own archive photographs, and I have acquired further images through donations from Palestinian families. I have also managed to buy some very important archive photography online – the idea of buying one's own history from the Internet seems absurd to me.

RL: I'd like to know about your perspective on the political and social situation in Palestine now, and how it has changed – what was it like when you were young?

HH: The perspective of Palestine from outside the country is different from what it is from within, and it is different today from what it was in the past, when I was living there, until I was 20 years old.

MJ: Hazem and I met at an early age. Life at that time was beautiful; we spent our time discovering art and life together. We were playing with colours, trying different compositions, styles, topics etc, influencing each other. Every day we changed ideas and worked in complete confusion. There was also a kind of competition to see who was better. This stimulated us to break down boundaries and set off to unknown territories. When we shared a studio together, our curiosity and experimental freedom enabled us to understand what life meant inside and outside our studio. Hazem and I have different personalities, but our studio brought us together and we developed our artistic practice together. In

1997, we showed our works for the first time in a group exhibition.

HH: The outlook now has become more comprehensive and clearer than before. I no longer see it as a personal issue, but as a universal humanitarian cause for the longest occupation in contemporary history. We have both been greatly influenced by the collective and individual memory that has been obscured.

I started to investigate the Palestinian history and archives from the 1820s up to the Balfour Declaration of 1917, and the results of that period on our present day. In January 2017, I went back to Gaza, after a forced absence of eight years, due to the closure of crossings and borders. As you know, the Gaza Strip is considered one of the most crowded places in the world in relation to its geographical area – over two million people live in an area 360km², 41km long, and between five and 15km wide. It borders Israel from the north and the east, and Egypt from the south-west. It is part of the territories where the Palestinian Authority has been seeking, through negotiations, to establish a state for more than 20 years, within the framework of a two-state solution. When I went back to the Strip, it looked completely different. Due to the crowdedness of the place and its changes, I failed to retrieve some of my earlier memories of it. My personal relationship with this city has now also changed, and I look at it from different perspectives and experiences: from the inside out and from the outside in.

In a city like Gaza, everything is inherently mixed in form and content. Of course, all of this has been created gradually over time, due to the lack of space and also because of the wars in the Strip. But, in amongst the huge neglected street signs and random images of martyrs, in between the heavily crowded streets and shops, within the overwhelming feeling of population density, and despite the fighting – you can come across a wedding in the narrow alleyways of the city; it all overlaps, side by side; it's such a contradictory relationship.

A few days after my arrival, I automatically began to photograph everything. I took a large number of photos and videos that reflect the reality of daily life, events and community practices. I felt as though I was living in a city of a thousand cities. Street celebrations are, in fact, a social aspect that is absent from television documentation, since networks are only interested in broadcasting the political life of the city and its struggles.



First spread;
Father and Mother on their Wedding Day, **Sliman Mansour**, 1984, oil on canvas, 92 x 85cm, courtesy the artist

Second spread:
Tebariya #01, **Hazem Harb**, 2017, collage and transparent Plexiglas on fine art paper, 105 x 80cm, courtesy the artist

Tebariya #02, **Hazem Harb**, 2017, collage on fine art paper, 105 x 80cm, courtesy the artist

Tebariya #03, **Hazem Harb**, 2017, collage on fine art paper, 105 x 80cm, courtesy the artist

This spread:
Housing #08, **Mohammed Joha**, 2017, collage on paper, 35 x 50cm, courtesy the artist

Following spread:
Housing #11, **Mohammed Joha**, 2017, collage on paper, 35 x 50cm, courtesy the artist

Housing #05, **Mohammed Joha**, 2017, collage on paper, 35 x 50cm, courtesy the artist

Housing #04, **Mohammed Joha**, 2017, collage on paper, 35 x 50cm, courtesy the artist



RL: What other significant places, like Tiberias, can no longer be accessed?

HH: Most Palestinian cities and areas have an important and strategic meaning, whether historical or tourist, and have been occupied since 1948. The vast majority of Palestinians are prohibited from visiting, or staying there even, including the historic area of West Jerusalem, which crosses one of the most important historic areas of importance for Christians and Muslims alike. Also, for example, residents of the West Bank are forbidden to visit or relax at the sea of Jaffa.

RL: Mohammed, where do you spend most of your time now? Do you find that your own experience of Palestine has a somewhat remote, even mediated feel now, is that reflected in your work through its sense of nostalgia?

MJ: I live in Paris, with a base at the Cité International des Arts, where I am able to develop new projects and enjoy the intense atmosphere of artistic activity and exchange. I have spent several years away from Gaza, and I often compare the places where I am to Palestine. I note the differences; but in my art you will always see Palestine.

RL: Can you give me an idea of what you think art's relevance is to politics in the context of the situation between Israel and Palestine? Is it as important and visible today as it used to be, say, earlier in Sloman's career?

MJ: Art can express concepts and has themes in social and political matters, and that includes Palestine. Today, art is at the forefront of spreading the Palestinian cause internationally and in supporting the struggle for freedom. Music, cinema, literature, food,

traditional clothing, they all express our Palestinian identity and struggle as people. In Palestine itself, the Palestinian Museum at Birzeit, together with the many art, cinema and literature biennials, and our participation in events abroad, for example, testify to the liveliness of the Palestinian cultural scene and its artists.

El Beit was at Tabari Artspace, United Arab Emirates, 6 February 2018 – 8 March 2018

*hazemharb.com
mohamedjoha.weebly.com
tabariartspace.com*

