

## **Outsiders on the Inside**

By John Halaka

*in the remains of the dawn I walk outside of my own body  
in the remains of the night I hear the footsteps of my own being*

Mahmoud Darwish

Mahmoud Darwish's stanza from the poem "A State of Siege"<sup>1</sup> is part of a call for continued resistance against looming cultural extermination. His verse implores us to reflect on the long journey to define one's personal, cultural and political identity and brings to mind the often asked, but not easily answered questions, *Who are we? Where do we come from? and Where are we going?*

Identity is not a monolithic entity but a complex psychosocial organism that we inhabit while it inhabits us. Within this organism, multiple identities coexist interdependently in visible and invisible layers that are constantly in flux. Some of those layers creatively inform and support each other, while others exist in an oppressive duel of supremacy. An individual's identity and by extension a nation's identity, is shaped by personal, familial, cultural forces and desires. Parts of our personal and national identities are projected upon us by outsiders; other parts are carefully cultivated by the individual, while others are a blend of the innate and a response to externally imposed vision of the self. How we define ourselves and how others define us through inherent, selected and imposed affiliations are important issues with which artists often grapple. This paper will investigate how a Palestinian artist, living in the Galilee as an Israeli citizen, explores and expresses aspects of her personal, cultural and national identity in her artwork.

This reflection on the complexity of cultural and political affiliations began to crystallize during the late summer of 2005, where five travelers who were unfamiliar with each other, gathered on the balcony of a hostel in Jaffa to enjoy the early evening breeze. During that brief and coincidental gathering, two casual conversations occurred simultaneously. I participated in the English conversation while being aware of the

Hebrew conversation occurring next to me. I suspected that one of the two young men conversing in Hebrew was a Palestinian. When only the two of us remained on the balcony, I asked him in Arabic if he was Palestinian (he had heard me speak only English up to that point). He gave me a surprised look and after a brief pause replied in English “My father was a Palestinian. I, am an Israeli-Arab.”

I had always heard Americans, Israelis and Europeans refer to the Palestinians in Israel as Israeli-Arabs, but I had never heard a Palestinian refer to himself as a such and was surprised by this man’s internalization of what I had always considered to be a racist term that underscored the colonialist and supremacist character of the Zionist enterprise. I was disappointed, even angry at his response. Didn’t he know that Palestinians have a duty to maintain their historical identity in the face of looming cultural extermination? Had he become a willing instrument of cultural self-oppression in exchange for tenuous assimilation and marginal acceptance as a non-Jewish citizen in the Jewish homeland? Was he simply projecting a public façade of the “good Arab” as a tool of self-preservation? Was this the way that Palestinians who became citizens of Israel viewed and identified themselves?

I realized on that old balcony in Jaffa that in my lifelong attachment to Palestine and my reflections on the Palestinian struggle, I had never carefully considered the complex identity of Palestinian-Israelis; an identity defined in large part by the opposing forces of forgetting and remembering who you are.

In a culture of occupation and resistance, the history and image of the oppressed is always in conflict with the image and history imposed by the oppressors. The entity that holds the reigns of power has the upper hand in defining the public discourse on the struggle and shapes that discourse, in large part, by constructing and promoting a distorted image of the subjugated population in order to undermine their identity and standing on the international stage. The projection of a subverted identity by the occupier on the occupied makes the elusive questions, *Who are we? Where do we come from? and Where are we going?* substantially more complex to answer, but all the more critical to

ponder. In the Palestinian / Israeli conflict, the construction and repression of identity continues to play a crucial role in how the parties view each other, how they view themselves and how the conflict is viewed, understood and treated in the international arena. As the obvious wielder of the reigns of power, the Israelis have defined the international discourse on the conflict. Israel has been very strategic and extremely successful at constructing and projecting an image of itself as a society under the constant threat of annihilation by belligerent, irrational and racist foes that “hate Israel more than they love their children”<sup>2</sup>. The Israelis have defined the “Arabs” and by extension the Palestinians, as a people bent on destroying a divinely sanctioned and democratic homeland for the world’s most aggrieved people. They have also succeeded, until fairly recently, in depicting the conflict as one between Israelis and Arabs and not, as it originally is and continues to be, between colonialist settlers dominating the indigenous Palestinian population while stripping it of its land, history and cultural identity. The Palestinians continue to survive in the shadows of Israel’s militaristic culture and to struggle with the task of defining themselves independently from Israel’s definition of them. The fact that the Israelis have succeeded in dividing the Palestinians from each other, physically, economically and politically makes the complex process of defining and asserting one’s cultural and national identity even more difficult.



Plate 1. *The Ruins of Kafr Bir'im. Galilee. 2006*

The term “Israeli Arab” has been and continues to be used by most Israeli Jews to dismiss the Palestinian identity of the non-Jewish citizens of Israel. Instead of acknowledging and embracing the distinct Palestinian cultural heritage of its non-Jewish population, Israel simply refers to almost 23% of its population as “Arabs”.<sup>3</sup> This consciously dismissive label avoids acknowledgment or even the existence of an indigenous and historical Palestinian culture that was decimated with the creation of Israel. It also strategically equates the Palestinian people with all other Arab speaking countries and cultures. The Israeli tactic of repeatedly denying the Palestinian character of its non-Jewish population and referring to them simply as Arabs has been part of a calculated attempt to make the entire Palestinian population eligible for transfer to and habitation in any Arab country. As Avigdor Lieberman, the overtly racist Israeli Deputy Prime Minister For Strategic Threats has said on numerous occasions “let them pack their bundles and leave for an Arab country.”<sup>4</sup> Lieberman’s call for the expulsion of all Palestinians, including those that hold Israeli citizenship, is not unique in Israel, nor is it new, but is part of a long pattern of denying the very existence of Palestinians in order to establish an exclusively Jewish state in Palestine. Since its inception, political Zionism has deliberately projected an image of Palestine as “a land without a people, a wasteland and a cultural vacuum”<sup>5</sup>. The seductive and enduring Zionist myth that Palestine was a land without a people, for a people without a land, denied the very existence of an established and thriving indigenous population in Palestine. It also made it easier for the Jewish founders of Israel, the great majority of whom were at the time, recent European immigrants to Palestine, to expel over 800,000 Palestinians in 1948, another 375,000 in 1967, and to destroy over 500 Palestinian villages in their quest to establish a purely “Jewish Nation”<sup>6</sup>. The genocidal process that facilitated the establishment of the Jewish State is incomplete. Today, over 1.3 million Israeli citizens are Palestinians<sup>7</sup>. They are individuals and their descendants who survived the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 and managed to remain in, or return to, the part of historical Palestine that became Israel.



Plate 2. *Boys taking a break from playing soccer in a destroyed neighborhood. Rafah, Gaza Strip. August 2005*”

There are essentially three categories of people comprising the approximately 10,000,000 individuals who identify themselves as Palestinians: First are the exiles who live outside the occupied Palestinian territories and Israel and who are denied the right to return to (and in most cases to even visit) their homeland; second are the insiders, who live in the West Bank and Gaza (considered by many to be the world’s largest outdoor prison, whose borders, air space and coastal access, are completely controlled by the Israeli Occupation Forces); thirdly are the Palestinian citizens of Israel, who exist as marginalized third class citizens in the land that was once theirs. I refer to this group as *outsiders on the inside*, since they exist outside the mainstream of Israeli culture as well as outside of the lands that are often seen as the future Palestinian state. This large group of Palestinians in Israel subsists in a zone of cultural and political ambiguity. Their identity is constantly tested by complex and competing historical, political, cultural, economic and personal affiliations. As non-Jewish citizens of the Jewish nation they are treated with great suspicion, and often overt contempt by Israeli Jews. They have been called the worst of all traitors, by right wing members of the Israeli parliament and

government and live in the shadow of potential expulsion from their land. (Avigdor Lieberman is not unique as a right wing Israeli politician who speaks openly of “transferring” the Palestinian citizens of Israel to neighboring Arab countries). Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza treat Palestinian-Israelis with some ambivalence as well. As Israeli citizens, they are, in most cases, indeed more privileged than the Palestinians living under the grinding restrictions and humiliation of occupation. One has to wonder how many Palestinian-Israelis would voluntarily choose to relocate and live in the occupied West Bank, poverty stricken Gaza or even in a future Palestinian state comprising those territories. The opinion of Palestinian-Israelis is never considered and their future rarely ever discussed in the “negotiations” for peaceful co-existence between Palestinians and Israelis. As Asad Azi, a Palestinian Israeli artist from the Galilee who lives in Jaffa told me in an interview, “When Arafat signed the Oslo Accord with the Israelis, he never even thought of asking me [referring by extension to all Palestinian-Israelis] where I wanted to live and how I felt about this deal. He never even considered my presence and opinion.”<sup>8</sup> In fact, when the PLO in 1988 recognized Israel and renounced claims to all pre 1967 Palestinian lands, they in effect severed political (although not cultural or historical) ties with Palestinian-Israelis. The 1993 Oslo Accord and all subsequent “agreements” that posit a two state framework for co-existence further severs the ties between Palestinian-Israelis, the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza and the Palestinians living in the diaspora. It would be helpful to reflect on how Palestinian-Israelis (the so called Israeli-Arabs) view and identify themselves. It is also crucial to consider the significant role they could play in a culture of co-existence that must replace the current culture of occupation and define the peaceful outcome of the ongoing Palestinian / Israeli conflict.

They are called Israeli-Arabs and apparently some have now begun to refer to themselves as such. Yet most still strongly affiliate themselves with Palestine and consider themselves first and foremost Palestinians. Indeed they are Arab, they speak, read and write the Arabic language (in addition to the required Hebrew) and share Arabic cultural customs and traditions. But to continuously deny their Palestinian heritage would be the same as dismissing an Egyptian her Egyptian national and cultural heritage or an

Algerian his Algerian national and cultural heritage and lumping them all together under the very broad and dismissive title of “Arab”. That is exactly what Israel has accomplished over the past 60 years with its Palestinian citizens. Palestinian-Israelis are arguably the most forgotten group of Arabs in the Arab world. Many if not most Arabs throughout the Arab world do not even know that over 1.3 million Palestinians exist in Israel and think that only Jews populate Israel. Many of the Arabs think that Palestinians continue to exist only in the West Bank and Gaza or survive in the shadows of various host countries in the Palestinian diaspora.

The experience of Palestinian Israelis should be seen as the model for future co-existence between the competing claims for land in Israel and Palestine. I will elaborate on that further below, but first, a look at the artwork of a Palestinian-Israeli artist may help to shed some light on the complex identity of this group and illuminate the potentially constructive role they could play in the settlement of the conflict.



Plate 3: Rana Bishara. *Bread for Palestine*.

Rana Bishara sewing bread in a performance, August 2006

### Rana Bishara

Rana Bishara is a 37-year-old Palestinian artist who was born in Tarsheha, a Palestinian village in the Galilee<sup>9</sup>. Her art studio is spread across the three rooms and courtyard of the old stone house where her grandmother was born. Rana lives with her aging parents in a comfortable apartment directly up the hill from that studio. The Bishara family has been in Tarsheha for several generations and all feel a profound attachment to their village, the Galilee and Palestine. In 1948, most of the Palestinian population of Tarsheha was expelled from their homes and the Israelis bombed the village heavily. After a couple of years in exile, Rana's father, along with other men and women who were forced from



their homes in 1948, managed to return to Tarsheha and begin to rebuild their lives in their historical village<sup>10</sup>. The current population of Tarsheha is considerably smaller today than in 1948 and most of the rich farmland that surrounds Tarsheha has been taken over by Israeli Jewish farms and settlements. Numerous Jewish suburbs as well as a few mixed Palestinian / Jewish suburbs, have heavily encroached upon the farmland and surround the historical village that is gracefully located on a steep hillside.

Rana's artwork is both poetic and literal. Her sculptural installations, paintings and recent performance pieces express, through a very personal voice, her attachment to and love for the land she inhabits. Her work also expresses her profound frustration with and rage against the ongoing occupation of Palestine and the oppression of Palestinians.

Rana Bishara's work functions simultaneously as an elegy for the Palestinian Nakba (disaster), an unmasking of the brutality of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and a critique of the biased western media's depiction of the Palestinian's struggle against their occupiers. Her conceptual approach is diverse. Some of her projects employ relatively confrontational and overt depictions of the brutality and humiliations inflicted upon the Palestinians by the occupying forces. Other projects develop subtle and often enigmatic metaphors that visually and emotionally seduce the viewers to contemplate the strength, tenderness, resilience and passions of the Palestinians. Her choice of materials, as I will discuss in greater detail below, range from conventional sculptural elements such as wood, glass and steel to common utilitarian elements such as chocolate, cactus, bread and balloons, that perform as surrogates for the body and spirit of Palestine and its people. Her work, in both its physical and conceptual manifestations is an expression of the inseparable blending of the personal and political experiences that define the identity of most Palestinians.



Plate 4. *Detail of cactus growing in the ruins of Kafr Bir'im. Galilee. 2006*

The cactus plant, called *sabar* in Arabic, has become one of the most enduring and widely recognized symbols of the Palestinian Nakba and Palestinian resistance. The native, broad leafed cactus, with its prickly skin, moist interior and sweet, seed laden fruit can be seen growing wild throughout Palestine and Israel. Very often, dense clusters of cacti are the only markers indicating the ruins of the 512 Palestinian villages that were depopulated, completely destroyed and erased from all maps, in or shortly after 1948, by the newly founded Israeli state. In those destroyed villages, the cactus grows freely and wildly in and around the ruins of old stone homes and public buildings. The cacti of Palestine stand as stubborn living reminders of the deceased and dispossessed. They are also seen as powerful symbols of resilience and hope. The cactus is a plant that refuses to die, refuses to disappear. It survives, even thrives, with little or no moisture, requires no tending and even when cut or uprooted, will eventually grow back in the same area.

Cuttings from one cactus, when transported to a different garden, adapt to the new soil, set broad roots and gradually begin to thrive. It's no wonder that the cactus has become one of the dominant and most revered symbols of modern Palestine. Ironically, Israeli Jews have also adapted the word for cactus, or sabra in Hebrew, as a national symbol. In this case the cactus refers to Jewish Israeli females as being tough, sharp and dangerous on the outside but moist, sweet and fertile on the inside.



Plate 5. Rana Bishara. *Homage to Palestine*. 1998

In the creative work of Rana Bishara, the cactus is used to depict the trauma imposed on Palestine and to express the tremendous resilience of its people. In a simple yet powerful work by Bishara called “Homage to Palestine” created in 1998, the artist tightly packed fresh cuttings of cactus in a sealed, clear, pickling jar to express the constant pressure and

restrictions imposed on the Palestinians. The cuttings in the jar reference the violent dismemberment and displacement of Palestinians from their land. It also references the oppressive restriction of movement created by tightly sealed and heavily guarded borders imposed on the Palestinian territories, as well as the limited growth opportunities available in the densely packed and carefully preserved container of occupation. This simple, eloquent piece addresses Palestine and Palestinian nationalism as an entity that has been securely contained and controlled. It represents the current reality of Palestine as a presence that can be easily moved to the back shelf of the international discourse on liberation, justice and human rights. Hidden from view, Palestinian aspirations would inevitably fall into the category of “out of sight, out of mind” and continue to be forgotten and neglected until they perished. The most menacing aspect of this work is that it addresses the desire by right wing Israelis to transfer the Palestinian population from Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Uprooted, dismembered and restricted, the sealed container of Palestinians can be easily transferred to a distant land. With a simple jar of cactus, Bishara eloquently deconstructs Israel’s historical strategy towards the Palestinians. Yet, Bishara’s jar of occupation contains a persistent degree of hope. The content of the jar, cactus slices, are remarkably adaptive and patient (the Arabic work for cactus, *sabar*, means patience). When the jar is broken (it is after all made of glass) and its contents released, many of the resilient cactus slices will manage to set roots and gradually begin to thrive in their native soil.



Plate 6. Rana Bishara. *Who buys the Road Map to Peace?* 2005

Bishara has made numerous works with cactus, both fresh and dried, uprooted and re-rooted. In her “Who Buys the Road Map to Peace”, she has sewn dozens of old cactus leaves together, forming ghostly screens of the uprooted, decomposing, lace-like cactus leaves. Her suspended cactus screens create a haunting, yet beautiful presence that evoke the ghosts of the dispossessed still haunting their ruined and occupied villages. Bishara’s “Who buys the Road Map to Peace” is a poignant reflection on the deadly course charted for the Palestinians within the framework of the Quartet’s Road Map for Peaceful Co-existence between Israel and Palestine. This road map, as it is eloquently analyzed in Bishara’s ghostly veil of desiccated cacti, leads only to the further and permanent displacement of Palestinians from their lands and to unending denial of the right of return for exiled Palestinians. When permanently detached from the land, even the sabar, the most patient and resilient hope for Palestinian nationalism, could eventually dry up and die.<sup>11</sup>



Plate 7. Rana Bishara. *Who buys the Road Map to Peace?* 2005 Detail



Plate 8. Rana Bishara. *Sweetie*. 1999

In another deceptively simple work, Bishara dipped freshly picked cactus slices in unsweetened chocolate, referencing the bitterness of occupation that covers the body of Palestinian identity. The unsweetened chocolate suggests that the sweetness of life has been replaced by the bitterness of occupation. Although, the chocolate's aroma, clearly perceived when viewing the work in person, reminds us that the potential sweetness of life still exists and lies somewhere beneath the dark and bitter veil of occupation. The prickly cactus thorns penetrating the hardened chocolate serves as a double metaphor. The thorns reinforce for the viewer the sharp pain experienced by Palestinians under occupation, as well as the pointed spears of resistance that define the right and duty of the occupied to resist their oppressors. Here again, the cactus slices also remind the viewer of the resilience, toughness and endurance of the Palestinians. This piece is indicative of Bishara's subtle and layered references that require the viewer to become an active participant in decoding complex and often competing, cultural and political signifiers.



من فلسطين إلى لبنان مع  
الدعم و التضامن

In Solidarity and support from Palestine to Lebanon

Rana Bishara رنا بشارة

Plate 9. Rana Bishara. *In Solidarity and Support*. 2006

During the July-August 2006 invasion of Lebanon by Israel, Bishara created a compelling image employing the motif of the cactus. The image replicates the Lebanese flag, but replaces the iconic cedar on the flag with a cactus leaf that has been carefully cut to assume the shape of the cedar tree. Bishara's blending of Palestinian and Lebanese national icons is a powerful gesture of solidarity that pays homage to the brutalized Lebanese population and unifies the two people in the repeated horrors inflicted upon them by the genocidal actions of the Israeli military. The image is also a defiant declaration to the oppressors that the Lebanese and Palestinians are more united than ever in their will to resist, persevere and eventually thrive in their respective homelands.

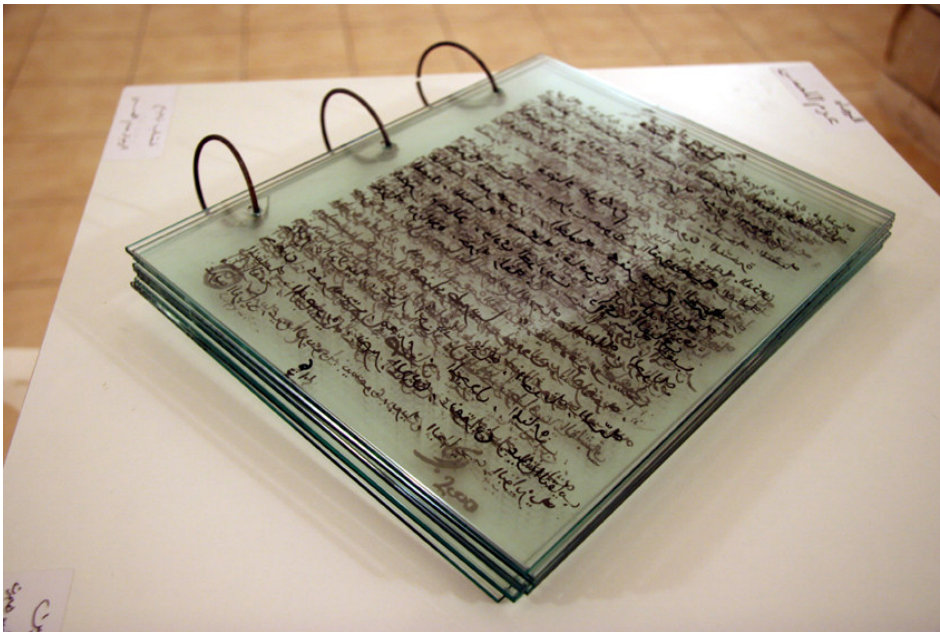


Plate 10. Rana Bishara. *Homage to 512 Destroyed Palestinian Villages and Towns. 1948-2000*

Another medium that Bishara has used in a number of projects are thin sheets of glass. Viewing the works she produced with glass physically and psychologically involves the viewer in the images and ideas she depicts. This fragile, transparent and potentially dangerous medium is extremely difficult to handle when presented as a book and even



more difficult to traverse when arranged as a spatial installation. The images drawn and printed on the glass are translucent and consequently difficult to clearly see and understand. Bishara's strategy of employing translucent images on fragile and potentially dangerous surfaces forces the viewer to become hyper aware of his/her position in relation to the images and ideas she depicts. This physical awareness extends, in the mind of the perceptive viewer, to a consideration of one's emotional, intellectual and political affiliations with the experiences she presents.



Plate 11. Rana Bishara. *Homage to 512 Destroyed Palestinian Villages and Towns*.

Bishara's *Homage to 512 Destroyed Palestinian Villages and Towns* commemorates the Palestinian villages eradicated by Israel. The fragile, yet physically heavy object is made of thin sheets of glass that have been bound together into a book. The ten glass pages are covered with translucent, hand written text listing the names of all of the destroyed villages. To view the book, one must very carefully turn the glass pages. This action is performed with the conscious risk of shattering the fragile book and injuring oneself. Bishara's book eloquently speaks of the disappearance of those villages and the delicate and potentially dangerous responsibility we have in preserving their ghostly memories.



Plate 12. Rana Bishara. *Blindfolded History*. 2003

One of Bishara's most ambitious works is an installation entitled "Blindfolded History 1948-2003". The work was first exhibited in 2003 and consisted of fifty-six sheets of thin glass. The number of sheets of glass reference the fifty-six years of occupation that had passed since the beginning of the Palestinian Nakba. The majority of the sheets of glass are suspended from the ceiling with thin, almost invisible, nylon wire. A few of the sheets of glass are arranged vertically on shelves that are hung along the wall of the deliberately cramped installation space. When approaching the installation, the viewer is struck by the seductive shimmering light glittering off the glass. The immediate feeling conveyed is that the space is simultaneously dense and vast. Before entering the installation, the viewer notices a translucent reddish brown rectangle imposed at about eye level on each sheet of glass. They appear to be photographic images, but they are difficult to discern from a distance. The viewer is compelled to approach and enter the shimmering maze like installation in order to clearly see the individual photographic prints.



Plate13. Rana Bishara. *Blindfolded History*. 2003 Detail



Plate14. Rana Bishara. *Blindfolded History*. 2003 Detail

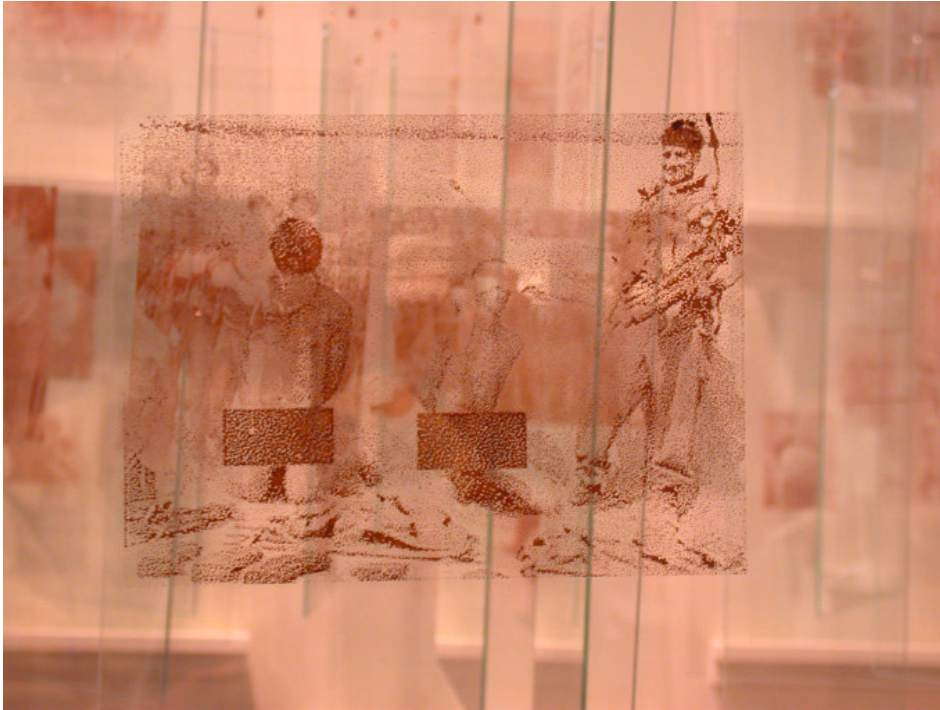


Plate15. Rana Bishara. *Blindfolded History*. 2003 Detail

Upon entering the installation, the feeling of glittering opulence experienced from the perimeters is immediately replaced by a powerful sense of dread and tragedy. The events rendered in the prints depict the brutal humiliations, terror and suffering that are experienced daily by the Palestinians under occupation. On each sheet of glass Bishara silk-screened a single image, referencing the brutality of the occupation and illustrating the ongoing horror resulting from the marriage of political convenience imposed by the international community on the Palestinians in 1948. The fifty-six images were selected by Bishara from the international media and unflinchingly illustrate, individually and collectively, the sadistic relationship between the occupiers and the occupied. The photographs selected by Bishara are reminiscent of Francisco de Goya's indelible images from the series "The Disasters of War". Goya's etchings were created between 1810 and 1820 in response to the storm of violence that engulfed his native Spain during the Napoleonic invasion. Yet, instead of Goya's hand drawn etchings representing the artist's dark Romantic vision of "man's inhumanity to man", Bishara's photographic silk-screened prints depict a remarkably sober and equally indelible, post-modern vision of a pre-moral, albeit highly mechanized, human brutality. Each of the fifty-six images

conveys a fragment of an ongoing story. The viewer instantly recognizes that the individual frames are not the whole story, but represent only a single moment, captured by the camera, of a contemporary grand epic of human suffering. Many of the images on the glass are heart wrenching and elicit an involuntary emotional response to step away from them. That response is instantly checked by the realization that suspended sheets of glass tightly surround you and that any abrupt movement could result in the disastrous shattering of the installation and multiple lacerations to the viewer. Trapped within the translucent glass maze, the viewer has no choice but to walk carefully and look closely at the painful images that are suspended in irregular, overlapping proximity to each other. From any vantage point inside the installation, you can see all of the images, yet you can only see them clearly from close proximity. The color and thin texture of the grainy prints, a warm translucent brown created by pointillist dots on the glass, suggests that they have been silk-screened with blood that has darkened through oxidation. How appropriately horrible such a medium would be for these dreadful, yet indelible scenes. Yet while thinking that the images are printed with oxidized blood, the viewer becomes aware of a sweet aroma of chocolate permeating the installation and realizes that the images are silk-screened with dark, unsweetened chocolate to represent the bitterness of life under the longest military occupation in modern history. Standing in this shimmering, delicate and dangerous forest of glass, surrounded by images representing fifty-six years of brutal occupation, one becomes aware of his/her moral position and responsibility to the tragedy depicted. The emotions stirred by the images in the mind of the viewer directly implicate her/him in the political tragedy that has been unveiled by the artwork and compel him/her to ponder the following questions: Why have we been living with these heavy blindfolds that obstruct our view of this ongoing tragedy? Who placed these blindfolds upon us? Why is the epic suffering of the Palestinians not adequately conveyed in the media? What are our moral responsibilities to this tragedy? Where do we stand in relationship to the oppressor and the oppressed, and what can we do to help resolve this inhumane misery? The installation leaves the viewer with a deep sense of mourning for the profound loss and agony conveyed in the fragile and grainy images and at the realization that the final chapter in this tragic epic has not yet been written, as the agony of occupation continues to this day. Bishara's "Blindfolded History" is not a

complete work. In subsequent presentations of the work, the artist will add new sheets of glass to commemorate the additional years of occupation that have passed. One is left to wonder how many sheets of glass will this installation contain before it is finally completed?



Plate 16. Rana Bishara. *Blindfolded History*. 2003 Detail

Bishara's identity as a Palestinian permeates her work. As a Palestinian citizen of Israel, she stands in both societies and is able to critically reflect, through the prism of her personal experiences, on the intimate, albeit violent union of Israeli and Palestinian cultures. Being a Palestinian-Israeli defines the political landscape of her identity. It is precisely from that complex cultural vantage point that she can unmask the false facade presented to the international community of a benevolent, democratic Israel that acts only in self-defense to secure the safety of its citizens. Bishara's artwork also reveals to that same international community, the colonialist, racist and often sadistic face that Israel presents to the Palestinian. Her experience as a Palestinian citizen of Israel provides her with the insights of an insider to both cultures. Because of her family's history and her

personal experience living as a marginalized “Arab” citizen of Israel, she understands the tragic suffering and epic loss of land and identity experienced by the Palestinians. She also understands Israeli history, culture, fears and national aspirations because they were imposed on her throughout her education and lifelong interactions with Israeli Jews. As a member of the often detested “Arab” minority of Israeli society, she will continue to be, under the current conditions, a mistrusted outsider inside Israeli culture. Bishara, like the majority of Palestinian-Israelis, is emotionally unable and politically unwilling to embrace the discriminatory ideology of a “Jewish Nation” that has been imposed on her historically multicultural homeland. Also, under current negotiations protocols, she will continue to be an outsider to a future Palestinian state. Bishara, like the 1.3 million other Palestinian-Israelis, exists in a state of national, political and emotional ambiguity. Their identity as Palestinians is overtly rejected by the Jewish state they have been forced to fit in to in order to remain in their historical land. Consequently, most do not feel that they could belong to Israel as a Jewish state without willingly forfeiting their Palestinian cultural identity. This dilemma of affiliations is clearly a burden that Bishara and others like her struggle with on a daily basis.

Is it possible for Palestinian-Israelis to exist in a nation that would equally embrace Palestinians and Jews? The bi-cultural experience of Palestinian-Israelis may well prove to be the real road map to peace. The complex bi-national identity of the 1.3 million Palestinian-Israelis should be seen and used as a bridge that could carry the competing parties over the deep chasm of territorial dispute and separation, to a future of coexistence and reconciliation in a single democratic state<sup>12</sup>.



Plate 17. Israel's Apartheid wall. Village of Abu Diss, East Jerusalem. 2005

The resolution of the Palestinian / Israeli conflict through the formation of a single state is not a new idea. It has been considered for decades and abandoned due to the competing parties' deep attachment to their respective, opposing nationalist ideologies. The emotional commitment of Palestinians and Israelis to separate states continues to be an obstacle to co-existence and the source of further violence and regional as well as international destabilization. Dividing the land has clearly not worked and will never work due to the political, economic and military inequity of the warring parties.

The majority of Palestinians recognize that Israeli Jews are not going to go away. In turn, the majority of Israeli Jews recognize that the Palestinians, barring a major genocide, are not going to disappear. Neither the Palestinians nor the Israelis are willing to abandon their claim to the land. Neither population is willing to leave or be forced to leave alive. The increasing violence and deepening mistrust created by the intransigent ultra-nationalist positions of both the Israeli and Palestinian leadership has resulted in a political impasse that foreshadows catastrophic results for the civilian populations. The current path is clearly leading both parties into a deeper abyss of conflict and suffering.



Since the signing of the Oslo accord over 14 years ago, the intermittent, but consistently disingenuous, negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian leaders have been based upon the principle of establishing an independent Palestinian state that would exist peacefully along side Israel. The framework of a two state solution is in theory desirable but in practice impossible to achieve due to the tremendous imbalance of power and resources between the negotiating entities. The entity that holds the greater power, Israel, manipulates and controls the “peace process”, fully aware that the weaker entity, the Palestinians, are unable to check Israeli actions. In fact, the road to a two state solution has been effectively bulldozed by Israel’s calculated and repeated efforts to undermine the weak and ineffectual Palestinian Authority and to destroy nascent Palestinian economic and physical infrastructures. Israel’s decades long program to destroy thousands of Palestinian homes, bulldoze and uproot miles of farmland and orchards and brutally repress and starve the Palestinian population, is part of a larger strategy to continue imposing its will on the Palestinians and further appropriate their land. Israel’s oppressive “security wall” has further divided the West Bank, appropriated large areas of Palestinian territories and isolated the Palestinians from the outside world as well as from each other. There is little left for a contiguous and sustainable Palestinian nation. Continued talks of a two state solution are completely misleading and detached from reality.

With the option of a two state solution effectively nullified by the fragmentation, dismemberment and isolation of the West Bank and the virtual destruction and starvation of Gaza, we are left with only four other options, each with its own daunting challenges and unacceptable outcomes for one or both of the competing parties: The first option is to expel all of the Palestinians from the West bank, Gaza and Israel and create a truly Jewish Nation in “Greater Israel”. The second option is to continue the current occupation of Palestinian territories and the subjugation of its inhabitants by the Israeli military. The third option is to annex the West Bank and Gaza, make them part of Israel, and offer the Palestinians limited Israeli citizenship that would be equal to South Africa’s former Apartheid policies towards its Black citizens. The fourth option is to create a

single democratic nation where Palestinian Muslims, Christians, Druze and Atheists can live as equal citizens with the Jewish inhabitants of the current state of Israel.

The one state solution may be the most moral, equitable and sustainable of all of the options but it will also be the most challenging for a large number of Palestinians and Israelis to accept and implement. A single democratic state that equally protects and nurtures the current populations of Israel and Palestine requires a dramatic shift in the regional and international political discourse on the conflict. It demands that Palestinians surrender the dream of an independent state just as it would require that Jews give up the idea of a Jewish Nation. In a single state, the current border between Palestine and Israel would be dismantled and the new state would encompass both territories. The constitution of the new state must guarantee equal rights and safety for all of its citizens, regardless of religion, race, cultural affiliations or gender. The current numerical equality between Palestinians and Jews, combined with the historical claims and emotional attachment to the land by both people, makes the one state solution attainable. All of the other options are completely unacceptable.

Can violent competition for territory be replaced by respectful co-habitation on the land that is equally cherished by Palestinians and Jews? Can the mistrust that defines the current relationship between the survivors of the Nakba and the survivors of the Holocaust give way to mutual recognition of the other's epic suffering? Can the tragic anguish of the two traumatized populations be reconciled in an inclusive nation that would neither be called Israel or Palestine? The complex bi-cultural experience of Palestinian-Israelis should be seen as the foundation (albeit a very imperfect one due to the racial discrimination they experience in Israeli society) upon which the equitable future of Palestinians and Jews, co-existing in a single state, could be built. The common national symbol of resilience and survival for both people, the cactus, reinforces the conviction that Palestinians and Jews can creatively co-exist and eventually thrive in a common national homeland. When that new nation is formed, I would like to respectfully suggest that Rana Bishara, be invited to design its flag.

A very special thanks goes to Rana Bishara who graciously and generously allowed me to interview her in her studio for three days during the summer of 2006. She also provided me with images of her work and a copy of her MFA thesis, entitled “Blindfolded History”. Her thesis was presented to the Savannah College of Art in 2003.

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The images in this paper are provided and copyrighted by John Halaka and Rana Bishara. The images cannot be reproduced or duplicated in any form without the written consent of the artists.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmoud Darwish “A State of Siege. Ramallah January 2002”. Translated by Ramsis Amun. Arabworldpress.com

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Friedman in an Interview with Terry Gross on the NPR program Fresh Air. August 1, 2006

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State. Central Intelligence Agency's World Fact Book. Israel. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/is.html>

<sup>4</sup> Avigdor Lieberman as quoted in Jonathan Cook's article: "Out of the Shadows. Israel's Minister of Strategic Threats". Information Clearing House. October 26, 2006. <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article15405.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Hallaj. "Palestine-The Suppression of an Idea". American for Middle East Understanding. Jan-March 1982. Volume 15, Issue 1. Page 2

<sup>6</sup> Salman Abu Sitta. [palestineremembered.com](http://palestineremembered.com)

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of State. Central Intelligence Agency's World Fact Book. Israel. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/is.html>

<sup>8</sup> Asad Azi in a video taped interview with John Halaka, recorded June 2006 in Jaffa.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Rana Bishara conducted by John Halaka at her studio in Tarshiha in June 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Rana Bishara, June 2006. Also <http://www.palestineremembered.com/Acre/Tarshiha/index.html>

<sup>11</sup> Since it does not positively address the Palestinian refugees' "Right of Return"; does not insist on the dismantlement of massive Israeli settlement in the West Bank; does not insure the equitable division of Jerusalem; does not provide the Palestinians a contiguous state, and does not give that future state genuine control over its borders and consequently its economy, the Quartet's "Road Map to Peaceful co-existence between Israel and Palestine" essentially codifies and perpetuates the current status quo and the severe imbalance of power between the Palestinians and Israelis.

XII For a comprehensive and eloquent discussion of the one-state option read Virginia Tilley's [The One State Solution. A breakthrough for peace in the Israeli Palestinian Deadlock.](#) University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor. 2005.

<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive and eloquent discussion of the one-state option read Virginia Tilley's [The One State Solution. A breakthrough for peace in the Israeli Palestinian Deadlock](#) University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor. 2005