

Intimacy in condensed spaces: interview with Palestinian artist Rana Samara

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The reason why Rana Samara is one of the most cutting-edge of Palestinian artists is because she looks at one fundamental aspect of our humanity, one which is generally overlooked when talking about the Palestinian experience: intimacy.

For this artist, intimacy is not just about love and sex, but is a mix of connection, comfort and feeling at home. It can be found in the presence of another person, as well as in something as simple as savouring food from one's home country when abroad. To investigate this feeling, Samara spent months in Al-Amari Refugee Camp, speaking with women about sensitive topics such as virginity, intimacy, sexual desire and gender norms, revealing their convictions about relationships and roles.

Though Rana is a determined, strong-willed woman with clear views, in her conversations she showed up as a listener, making no pre-judgments, simply displaying a willingness to understand. These conversations form the cornerstone of Rana's paintings, videos,

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installations and embroidery. Her “Intimate Space” series, was presented recently by Ramallah’s Zawyeh Gallery at Art Dubai 2017, and put the spotlight on the depth and complexity of the research carried out by the Palestinian artist.

“At Al-Amari Refugee Camp I began wondering about the private lives of couples living in such condensed spaces that afford them almost no privacy,” Samara tells me.

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This privacy is especially difficult to achieve considering the large size of most Palestinian families and the cramped proximity in which neighbours and families live.

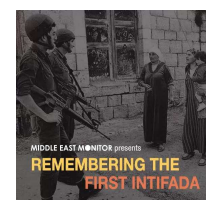
In the fashion of many women artists, Rana Samara tackles the political through the personal, showing that the two dimensions are intermingled, inevitably so. With “Intimate Spaces” she depicts rooms with unmade beds, with clear signs of the recent lovemaking. The colours are bright, the sensation they convey is warmth and comfort.

In fact, the feeling they evoke is similar to the famous installation “My Bed” by Tracey Emin, which consisted of the artist’s own messy *bed*. Like Britain’s Emin, Rana Samara is seen as a bit of a rebel, but the challenges she had to face are quite different. A mother of three and hailing from a conservative background, she pursued a bachelor’s degree at the International Art Academy, Ramallah, and a two-year MA in Fine Art at Northwestern University in Chicago.



“Since I was a child I have always been interested in colours and been fascinated with everything that moved around me,” she says. “I was always drawing and always knew I wanted to be an artist but had to figure out precisely what shape that would take. So my first degree was graphic design and then I continued to study fine arts, but couldn’t find myself in either of the two. Where I finally found myself was contemporary art.”

I ask her if, as a female artist, she thinks that she faces difficulties in the art world. Her response is that if women really want something they will go for it. “There are no artists in my family, and my dad wanted me to study finance, but after one semester I dropped out of school to study art. I kept studying for eight years, which is a long time.” Being a mother, she says, it was hard. “I was fighting with my family, with my ex-husband. They kept on questioning what I was doing, pointing out that I couldn’t make a living out of art plus I was a woman. In Palestine in particular, the only way to make a living with art is to be a teacher.”



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Zawyeh Gallery came onto the scene when she had just graduated. “The gallerist came to my exhibition and was fascinated by my paintings. To my great surprise he even bought them, which was really shocking for me at the time.”

What, does she think, caught the gallery’s attention? “Look, there are a lot of artists in Palestine. Many give up even though they are amazing. Here the established artists — who we love — are those who are prevalent in the gallery spaces. So any young artist who wants to emerge really needs to bring something new and special to the conversation, in terms of materials, but especially in terms of topics. All the artists are talking about the political struggle in Palestine; I’m doing that too, but through a different lens.”

Another work that really fascinated me was Samara’s “Virginity Handkerchiefs” installation. Could she tell me a bit about where the idea for that came from?

“This idea for the work came one day during the preparation for a wedding, hearing my mother and my aunt talking about these white handkerchiefs they



‘Virginity Kerchiefs’ by Rana Samara seen during an installation in 2013

had bought.” According to a Palestinian tradition, a bloodstained handkerchief is given to the mother of the groom, which proves that the bride was a virgin. “My immediate reaction was: ‘What the...! What are you doing?’” Her mother told her to stay silent because she’d mess everything up,

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In that moment I felt an urge to do work about this. It took me six months to elaborate how to represent this concept. I didn’t want to take sides necessarily. In my art I want to step out and let other people talk about this topic.

So she bought 200 pieces of handkerchief material and gave it to people and asked them to write on it what they thought about virginity. Once they came back, Samara basically curated them.

The Palestinian artist often involves other people, creating collaborative projects. Sometimes this means having conversations with women on themes that are not spoken about openly in Palestinian society or are even regarded as taboo. What, I wonder, is her approach to get the women to open up?

“It’s a skill,” she explains, “and it improves with time. I lived in the refugee camp for seven months and I met women; we talked about food, cooking, kids, and only then could I ask my questions.” That, she points out, is how you build trust. “However, I have always been good at making people talk about personal subjects. I have been told I’m a good listener.”

She claims that she doesn’t want to convey her own views in her work, but it seems that she still feels strongly about many of the subjects

covered. How does she manage her own emotions while making the art? Experiencing mixed feelings about these topics, Samara is sure that she will never forget these conversations.

“There are a lot of stories that broke my heart. Sometimes I’m happy because women can start talking and opening up about this part of their lives. I have always dreamed about creating social change in a way, and inspiring people. For many women I met it’s hard to improve their situation, but being a women with kids myself, I think I inspire them in a way. And everyone asks me the same question: ‘You always paint other people’s rooms, when will you finally paint your own?’ I tried once, but I felt that it was not the right time.”



Why does she separate herself from the work? “I think if I want to talk about myself it’s a different topic. It’s not the same concept. And of course, when I get to take pictures of the room of a woman I have spoken with, or if she sends me the pictures, I always look for some personal connection with it. For example, I had a friend who sent me a picture of his hotel room where he had sex. When I saw that it was a hotel I cringed, because it felt cold; really, really cold. This observation made me reflect on my artistic process. The room itself was interesting, but I felt there was something missing. I couldn’t paint it.”

What, I ask Rana Samara, is intimacy to her? She tries to explain with a story.

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The first month I was in Chicago, I was going to a Middle Eastern restaurant to eat. In the beginning the city, the people, everything felt really cold. Only when I was eating at that restaurant did I feel soothed. It was because of the music, the food, the table, the owner and, of course, the food.

Eating on her own, she found herself thinking that this was really intimate. “I realised that intimacy is not only about sex. The act of eating is intimate. This might sound weird, but I was asking all of the people who were eating alone if I could join them and eat together.” Most of the time they said yes, and they would start a conversation from there. “This is why I say intimacy is not just about physical space, or about sex. It’s about something else I can’t even name. I guess this is why I’m making art about it.”