

The body as an archive: interview with Farah Saleh

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Farah Saleh in What My Body Can't Remember (2019) © Chris Scott, courtesy of the artist

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Where does a refugee find her homeland? Perhaps in unexpected places; a memory of the country might emerge through the most mundane gestures, or even from a simple interaction with certain objects. Memories of the homeland are always buried in the refugee's mind and movements, but in order to find these reminiscences, one needs to excavate and be willing to block out all the noise of everyday life to see what emerges.

That's precisely the method that Palestinian dancer Farah Saleh employs to find the Palestine within herself. Born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria, she moved to Jordan as a young girl, and then went back to Palestine before finally completing her academic studies in Italy. All the while, she attended many different dance classes and workshops, which ensured a non-linear dance education.



PAST-inuous (2021) Still from Zoom recordings, courtesy of the artist

"I didn't have formal training," she told me. "I was always taking courses and workshops at a young age while studying cultural mediation. A good classical and contemporary foundation helped me build my practice. When you have the technique you can leave it and then come back to it."

In her current work, she never followed a specific dance method but developed her own, building on her idea of an archive of gestures since 2013. "In the dance world it's very common to work

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on her idea of an archive of gestures since 2015. "In the dance world it's very common to work with improvisation. For example, you can riff on the memories of your childhood. But I wouldn't call what I'm doing improvisation. In my case, I'm actively digging into my memory, and try to avoid going into dance technique."

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With this process she created one of her most interesting pieces, "What My Body Can't Remember", wherein she completely relied on her bodily memories. "For that piece I didn't really look into a physical archive, like videos or photos. I just tried to remember the gestures I was doing in 2002 under Israeli invasion, during the Second Intifada," explained Saleh. "In order to access those memories, I spent a lot of time with my own body in the studio. Slowly images were coming back into my mind and muscle memory."

From these initial images she started to recall specific objects that were with her at the time. Bringing these objects into the studio and interacting with them would in turn would elicit other memories. "These objects are not archive materials. For example, if in my memory there is a blanket, and I brought a blanket into the studio, but not the very same one I had at the time, I was more of a touchstone of memory."

Over the years, many of her readings and works have been about decolonising the body, which led her to start questioning the technique, which has historically been mostly white or appropriated from other dances and cultures. "So it's a big question at the moment. What is dance, what is technique, why are we doing that technique? But I'm glad I asked myself these questions and now I know what to do with it."



For the upcoming Dance International Glasgow, Farah Saleh is preparing a new interactive live performance installation called PAST-inuous. This will premiere live in Glasgow from 26-27 March before touring to Dundee Rep on 29 March and the Fruitmarket Gallery in Edinburgh from 27-28 April.

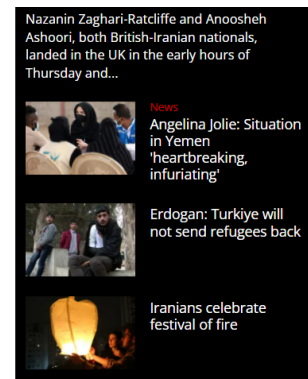
PAST-inuous has been created over a digital platform with eleven Palestinian dancers, mostly third-generation refugees, some living in the diaspora and others in Palestine — two are in Edinburgh, two are in Berlin, four are in Gaza and three are in Nablus — and in collaboration with video artist Lucas Kao. The work aspires to reflect on the Palestinian refugee experience, using the bodies of the eleven artists as living archives, in an attempt to find connections between the artists' daily gestures and the gestures of their families expelled in the past.

"The choreography tackles the gestures of our grandparents that we are trying to remember from stories, photos, testimonies and personal archives, and see how they resonate with our bodies today. But it's not about nostalgia. It's more about whether we connect with past generations and experiences, and how."

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Buried within the intention of the piece is the idea to address the future of the Palestinian refugee cause and its connection to the current global refugee condition, presenting it to an international audience. The first time the work was performed was 2021, in the form of an interactive video online that people could watch on their computers. For Saleh, though, it's an experience of learning and exchanging gestures of refugee-hood and their resonance in our bodies. "In my long-term research, I work with the body as a store of memories. That's where knowledge is shared and experienced."

To prepare the dancers, Farah asked them to dig into their family archives, photos, letters, testimonies or storytelling, looking for the gestures that they were doing daily in their homes. "Some of them are about work, doing chores at home, washing clothes. My grandfather was, for example, participating in demonstrations against the British Mandate in 1936, so I was re-enacting his gestures in the performance."





Parole, parole, parole...(2012) © Caroline Pelletti, courtesy of the artist

Because the piece will be presented to different audiences that might not be aware of the refugee experience, Saleh doesn't expect people to come with a deep knowledge of refugee-hood, or to approach a dance performance as a lecture. "But I'm aware that when you see someone moving, something moves internally. It's not about knowing but rather experiencing, and perhaps relating."

With PAST-inous Farah Saleh had the chance to dig deeper into aspects of her own Palestinian identity and she believes that she now knows more about it. "I dig into my body, I read and educate myself. The more I get to know the bigger picture, and relate it with the micro-narratives, the more I get to know myself better and am able to understand myself, not only in relation to the struggle as the occupied, but also starting to ask how we as Palestinians begin to express our self-determination."

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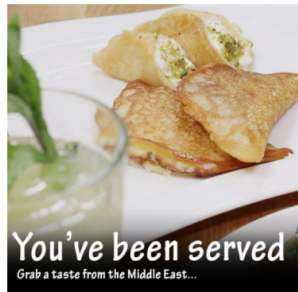
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