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Double Blessings: Food as a symbol of resilience for the Palestinian diaspora

Culture 5 min read

Naima Morelli | 31 August, 2023

Fruits weave together ancestral longing, anchoring us to home. 'Double Blessings' is an exploration of four artists who are connected to Palestine. Their art tells stories of consumption and lineage, with food as a common but diverse language.



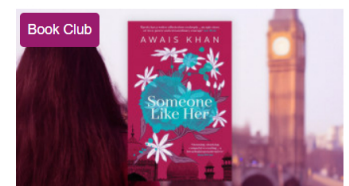
A watermelon with an ear greets visitors to the Chicago space Roots & Culture Contemporary Arts Centre while in a video artist Fadh Fakhouri lays on the ground and pours gasoline into his own mouth through a funnel.

Such surreal images are found in the show *Double Blessings*, which opened on Friday, August 4 at the Roots & Culture Contemporary Arts Center in Chicago.

This kind of surrealism, however, is highly political. These images of Indian figs, oranges, and lemons are not mere still lifes or playful representations of food. They rather present a multi-layered narrative of culture, identity, and resilience around the [Palestinian diaspora](#).

"In Palestine, the act of eating transforms into an [act of resistance](#)," says Palestinian-American performance artist and curator Noel Maghathe. "Each bite is not just a taste of home but also a taste of defiance, a testament to the spirit of survival and the will to hold on to their roots."

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"Every Palestinian continues to experience the Nakba in some way; 48'ers experience a kind of inverted diaspora, that is, living every day in the wound of the loss of our land and its people... Living in the crater of Palestine and longing for the return of your exiled people is a kind of devastating existence that may require a new word altogether"

In their work as a curator, Noel focuses on [Palestinian heritage](#) and the [broader Arab diaspora](#), aiming to bring forth diverse and nuanced narratives, to the broader Palestinian cause. All their latest shows speak of the transformation of everyday acts into acts of defiance.

The particular angle they take – reflected in the choice of the artists and artworks – cuts at the core of the contemporary paradigm shift, which takes monolithic narratives, and gives them new layers of complexity. In this sense, *Double Blessings* speaks to the need to educate audiences about the pain of occupation, while also delving into personal identity, beyond surface-level labels.

For Noel, who already used food in their own personal artwork as an artist, the initial idea for the show came from a study of the use of fruit in art, and how it was intertwined with the search for a home for Palestinians: "I felt so many of us in the diaspora had similar moments of using food, meals, and the land, to bring us back home," they said.



The poster for "Double Blessings" by Sara Allen

The depicted fruits – watermelons, oranges, lemons, sabar, become symbols of what was once readily available and yet often denied and restricted, accentuating the realities Palestinians face.

The title of the exhibition comes from the breaking of the word 'Sabbat' down to 'two halves', thinking about the different phases of



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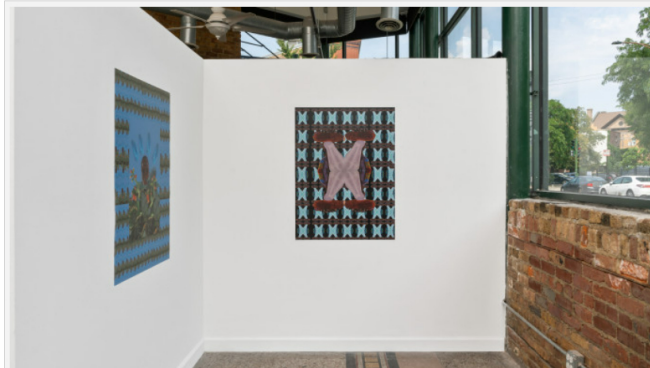
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broken down to two halves, thinking about the different phases of meals: "I was playing with the wording a bit and with personal feelings of spending time with the community," says the curator, who believes that time feels always doubled when it's shared with others at the dinner table.

Noel put together the works of artists with rooted connections to Palestine while based in the US, and they identify with the experience of the diaspora in different ways.



Installation of work by Mohammad Tayyeb [photo credit: Robert Chase Heishman]

Mohammed Tayyeb (Oakland/Khalil) does identify with the diaspora, as he emigrated to the US in 2018 to pursue a status that would allow him to visit my homeland and be in a safer environment for exploring his queerness. "However, it really feels like sometimes there's no home for a lot of identities," he notes. "Nevertheless, the love we find among other individuals facing the diaspora in our context, and even in different contexts, is powerful."

His collage, titled "Sabr Sabr" is inspired by his daily life practices and routine and visually provides an answer about occupation, colonisation, and the Palestinian identity. "As much as they try to erase us, we are in the land, the cactus, the soil".

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Fadl Fakhouri (Los Angeles/Khalil) uses videos where he performs surreal, aggressive acts tied to food, like the aforementioned pouring gasoline in his own mouth. For him, the experience of diaspora has been one of searching for home, be it real or imaginary not only in Palestine, but in the institution of family, queerness, and spirituality: "All of these are so strongly entangled in society, but especially that of Palestine."



"Wine, Lemon, Egg, Gasoline" by Fadl Fakhouri [photo credit: Robert Chase Heishman]

Besan Khamis (Baltimore/Nazareth), who realized paintings with fruits

celebrating the beauty of the land, says he identifies more with the word “return” than the word “diaspora”: “It’s a term I am more committed to,” he says. “Every Palestinian continues to experience the Nakba in some way; 48’ers experience a kind of inverted diaspora, that is, living every day in the wound of the loss of our land and its people,” he explains. “Living in the crater of Palestine and longing for the return of your exiled people is a kind of devastating existence that may require a new word altogether.



“Detail of Rumma” by Amena Sheikh [photo credit: Robert Chase Heishman]

Amena Sheikh (Cincinnati/Gaza) works with the typical Palestinian textile – called tatreez – in an experimental way, embodying both the struggle against erasure and the resilient consumption of cultural identity. Through this, she brings her connection to the homeland, portraying the diaspora’s complexities while affirming the longing for belonging.

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“At times, being a diaspora artist, I feel the burden of guilt and don’t feel like I can properly claim to be Palestinian,” she says. “So I try to harness the feeling of small moments of cultural pride and imagery in my work. Even the smallest bits of understanding and discovery count.”

Noel hopes that the show will be able to educate American audiences, inviting them to ask deeper questions about [Palestinian history](#), while being relatable. “The show underscores the Palestinian spirit of resilience in the face of adversity, signifying an enduring connection to our homeland and a refusal to let go of our cultural identity, despite systemic constraints.”

Naima Morelli is an arts and culture writer with a particular interest in contemporary art from the Middle East, North Africa and the Asia-Pacific region. She is also the author [Arte Contemporanea in Indonesia](#), [un'introduzione](#) and [The Singapore Series: a contemporary art reportage](#)

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