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The body at the centre of colonial power: interview with Palestinian artist Dina Mimi

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Palestinian artist Dina Mimi [Dina Mimi]

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A compelling voice in the contemporary art scene, Dina Mimi's work incorporates video, sound, performance and text to investigate the physicality of resistance in Palestine.

Does making art still matter in a world where war and genocide are unfolding in real time? Does it make sense to exhibit, when the world is at war? Is it OK to speak about one's own art, when your friends, relatives and neighbours are being killed?

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All of these questions are extremely relevant to Palestinian artist Dina Mimi, whose art has death, protest, martyrdom, and the physicality of resistance in the context of the occupation of Palestine as central themes. She is currently exhibiting her newly commissioned work at the Future Generation Art Prize exhibition in Kyiv, at the PinchukArtCentre. The exhibition showcases the work of 21 artists, and is running until 19 January next year.

Throughout the exhibition we see the exploration of local histories and mythologies to overcome historical trauma and the long-lasting effects of wars, as well as the process of liberation from the oppression of colonial influence. One aspect of this 2024 edition is the sensitivity to the inner ties that unite families and communities, and their exploration of collective actions for solidarity and healing from loss.



Mimi's work in the exhibition consists of a 13-minute video, packed with multiple references, one being the relationship between South Africa and Palestine and their exchange of gifts. "What struck me was that the statue of Nelson Mandela that we have in Ramallah, gifted by the people and government of South Africa around 2015," she told me.

Her observations spurred a series of reflections for the artist about how both objects and people get in and out of Palestine, given the occupation. "I reflected on how a statue to be shipped needs to be put in a box, wrapped, and unwrapped, unboxed, and then put on its pedestal. It's almost the opposite of when a person dies, or gets killed. You wrap them, put them in a box, and then bury them. I wanted to stress this opposite relationship."

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With this image in mind, Mimi went through archive footage of Palestine, mostly from Britain and France from the 1950s until the 2000s. Handling this material and transforming it through a montage to create the final video piece, felt almost therapeutic.

"With editing," she said, "I'm basically rewriting the visual narrative, merging the archival sources with many more, including my original footage, and with an interview with Edward Said from the 1970s, talking about running away out of fear and terror being the first human impulse."

These ideas resonate in one of her most recent video works from 2023, "The Melancholy of this Useless Afternoon". This consists of a two-part video, researching the delicate relationship between the fugitive and the smuggler. Both fugitive and smuggler share gestures of hiding by outsmarting the surveillance gaze.

In both videos, Mimi reconstructs a poetic and capturing installation of little things that are told through acts of escape. From the stories exchanged in the sewers, to the swallowed capsules holding letters from the prison to the release of smuggled goldfinches, the videos ask the question of how smuggling routes can become the pathways to decolonisation.

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The theme of freedom of movement, as well as how colonial power tries to control the body of the people, is central to Mimi's work.

"Sound was a key element in the video," the artist pointed out. She mingled bird songs with several liberation songs from Oman, Yemen and Palestine.

Born in Jerusalem, Dina Mimi's first approach to art was through cinema. "As a teenager, I would do film marathons at home and from 12 am till 6 pm, all summer," she reminisced. "I would write down what I enjoyed about a movie and why. I reckon it was a bit of a nerdy thing to do. And then it developed to more art house movies."

At the beginning of art school, she chose glassblowing, with the idea of doing glass sculptures. However, during her master's degree in Switzerland, she ended up developing the performance and video side of her work. Despite versatility in terms of mediums, a common trait for the artist has always been her love of storytelling.

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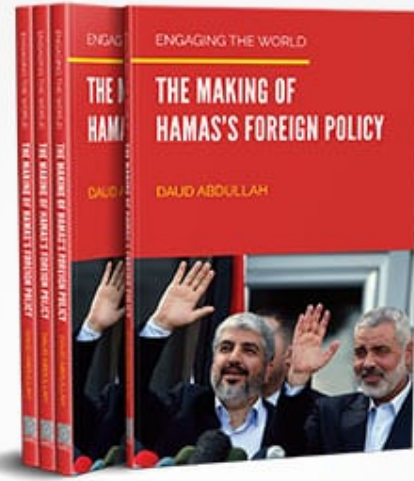
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This is exemplified by Mimi's first video work, "In order to talk with the dead", which represented a stepping stone into the set of reflections that led to the creation of her work for the Future Generation Art Prize.

That work spoke about the skulls of North African people seen as a colonial object or relic and was inspired by the finding of Ali Farid Belkadi, an Algerian historian who identified 24 skulls of Algerian resistance fighters at the 1849 Battle of Zaatcha which were taken back to France as trophy heads on display at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. "This caused a scandal and was much discussed in the news, but with absolutely no work towards returning them, until last summer," said Mimi, who transfigured the archival material speaking of the skulls into a video that ended up being abstract and experimental in terms of editing.

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Another art form that belongs to Mimi's practice is the lecture performance. This is the case of her 2020 "Grinding the Wind", where the artist navigated the missing parts of the story of her great-grandfather, who underwent the gruelling experience of medical tests and open-heart surgery at an Israeli military hospital in 1969.

"That was one of my last performances before transitioning to video. Now I prefer video, which is more detached." The artist confessed that she feels uncomfortable performing in Europe, because of the expectations towards her as a Palestinian. "I felt a sense of piety coming from the institution and the audience" she recounts. "I'm not interested in your tears, you know."

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How does she feel about exhibiting in Kyiv, in a country at war, for the Future Generation Art Prize?

"It feels bizarre. With the ongoing genocide back home, I only wish that everything will shut down and everyone will join the global protest against genocide instead."

Like many Palestinian artists, she has been blocked creatively since 7 October last year, and the work for the prize was the first she was able to put together.

If the art world must go on despite war, at least artists should speak about something that really matters. "We encountered numerous emancipatory voices of women artists, stories and practices from those who have been historically oppressed or marginalised in different parts of the world but are now finding their footing," said Inga Låce, the co-curator of the Future Art Prize exhibition. "These conversations naturally led us to question how, in moments of political deadlock, hope can emerge, and how movements can form, bringing bodies and energy towards hope, resistance, and ultimately, liberation."

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