

The fine line between law and justice

Palestinian artist Yazan Khalili seeks to examine how challenging the legality of certain practices becomes an act of subversion

Yazan Khalili's first solo exhibition in Dubai, *On the Other Side of the Law*, explores the fine line between law and justice in the context of colonialism, modern technology and the art market. The Palestinian artist who lives in the West Bank, has used his own experiences of the systems and structures imposed on Palestinians, to examine how concepts of law and justice are practiced in contemporary global politics, and how challenging the legality of certain practices can ironically be considered an act of subversion. His artworks include videos, photography, paintings and installations that deal with different aspects of the relationship between an individual and the law, and highlight the inherent injustices and conflicts within our legal and economic systems. The show compels viewers to introspect on the injustices happening all around us, and their consequences on the whole of society.

"As a Palestinian, dealing with issues of legality, justice and being able to speak for yourself in front of the law is a part of our struggle. But as an artist, I am also concerned with these issues in the art world. Although the works in this show were created at different times over the last few years, they all address this theme in different ways," the artist says.

The centrepiece of the show is a three-channel video installation, *Robbery in Area A*, where the artist has used a famous bank robbery that took place in Ramallah as the reference point to explore how geopolitics has created conditions such that a bank robbery can be seen both as an act of theft and an act of resistance. The title refers to the fact that the Oslo Accords agreement of 1993 led to the division of the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C with Ramallah being in Area A. By thus dividing the West Bank, the peace agreement allowed for a new economy to emerge based on banking system, loans and neo-liberal structures, but it also led to new forms of exploitation and resistance.

Each of the three large screens in this installation tells a different part of this story. For the first video, the artist stood all day on a street in Ramallah where many banks are located and filmed the environment in the area, thus 'gazing' into this economic system and structure. For the second video, he has filmed various fires happening around the city. There are no people in this video, and all one can see is smoke wafting up from different areas, subtly conveying the inflammable situation that exists in the city, side by side with the financial institutions. The third video features the testimony of a Palestinian, who collaborated with the Israeli bank robbers, and was the only one to be caught. While the man sounds conflicted about collaborating with Israelis, he justifies it by calling it an act of resistance against the new liberal economic system. His testimony offers insights into how the robbery was carefully planned, and how ordinary Palestinians feel about their situation.

"While researching this robbery, I found that the thieves had a thorough knowledge of the Oslo agreement and had planned the robbery based on which areas the Palestinian police can reach, and who they can arrest. They used the legal system to successfully rob the bank. So, the same structure that allows the Palestinian authority to exist and develop this economic system, also makes it vulnerable to robbery, and makes it harder to protect itself. At the same time, there is the conflict that while the Palestinian authority and businesses are collaborating with Israelis, individuals who do so are branded as traitors. Through this Palestinian situation, this work raises questions about the structure and functioning of global financial and political systems that often put ordinary people on the wrong side of the law, while allowing powerful people to profit by exploiting the systems," Khalili says.

Through a new set of paintings, *Apartheid Monochromes*, Khalili has highlighted the repressive system of ID cards for Palestinians introduced by Israel in 1949. These mandatory cards are classified into different colours, and the colour of the card issued to a person is dictated by a complex set of rules based on birthplace and residence. The system deeply affects the daily lives of Palestinians because the card they carry defines the restrictions on their movement and activities, determining their political, economic and

social life and in effect their identity. Khalili's set of monochrome paintings, with one canvas covered with the exact colour of each of the cards, focuses on an apartheid system that divides people based on identity, race, borders and citizenship.

"These cards define our relationship with the law — our movements, our freedoms, even who we can marry. I have recreated the exact colours of the cards on these canvases, because they represent an abstraction of the legal system of apartheid by which the Israelis divide Palestinians. The system is based not on skin colour, but on the colours of the cards you carry," Khalili says.

His photographic diptych, *Regarding Distance*, elaborates on the unseen but deeply emotional consequences of the system of ID cards such as the harsh reality of an entire generation of Palestinians who have grown up without the possibility of ever visiting Jerusalem, while constantly seeing the city in images all around them. One photograph in the diptych shows a picture of the Dome of the Rock hanging in a classroom. The other is a distant view of Jerusalem, with a glimpse of the Dome of the Rock, taken by Khalili. "As a green card holder I cannot go to Jerusalem. But there is a point on the way from Bethlehem to Ramallah, where if I stand and gaze hard, I can see the Dome. So, this photograph taken from that spot represents the legal position and viewpoint of a green card holder," Khalili says.

The artist has also addressed legal issues in the art market. Concerned that an artwork by a Palestinian artist, protesting against Israeli occupation, might be acquired by an Israeli museum or collector, Khalili has created a contract that gives the artwork the right to dictate the conditions regarding its ownership and display. For this work, titled *I, The Artwork*, the artist worked with a lawyer to draft a contract between an artwork and the art world, including institutions, curators and collectors, which lays down the conditions of its existence, right from who can own it (settlers and occupiers barred), to where and how it can be displayed. The contract, exhibited as a photograph, thus gives the artwork itself the rights usually held by an artist. The legal looking, but illegal contract asks questions about the systems and structures of the art market, and how they can rob a work of its meaning and value.

In another new work, *Copy of a Copy of a Copy*, Khalili has used posters of Palestinian artist Sulieman Mansour's iconic painting, *Jamal Al Mahamel II* (carrier of hardships) to explore ideas of authenticity and originality in relation to the art market, the proliferation and commodification of images, and the changing nature of the image as a conveyer of meaning. Whereas in the video, *Hiding Our Faces Like The Dancing Wind*, he has linked the use of facial recognition technology, and its tendency to typecast people, with colonial mechanisms of racial classifications and the historical narratives of exploitation.

"My work is about the position of the individual with regards to the structures of law, and every person's ability to have their voice heard to get justice. Although Palestine is an extreme and obvious case of the law becoming a tool for creating injustice, this is happening everywhere. Systems of oppression that divide people on the basis of things such as their economic and social status exist on various levels in all societies," Khalili says.

Jyoti Kalsi is an arts-enthusiast based in Dubai.

On the Other Side of the Law has been organised with the support of the Sharjah Art Foundation, and will run at Lawrie Shabibi gallery, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz until June 27.