

The newest addition to the Lawrie Shabibi Gallery

Politics, art and identity



Inside the Lawrie Shabibi gallery in Al-Serkal avenue, Dubai

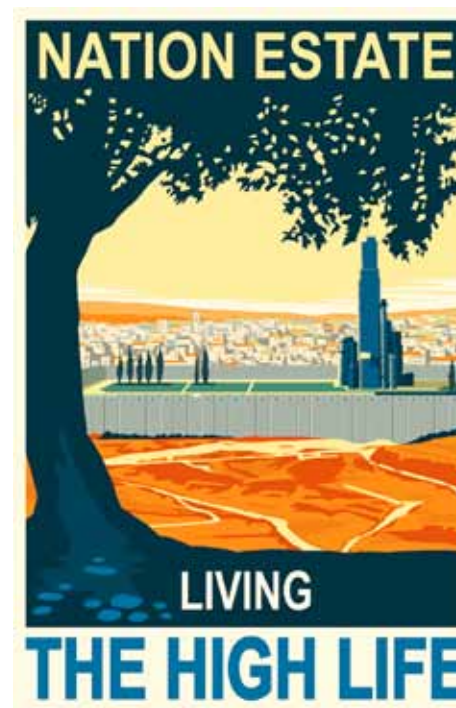
Al Serkal Avenue in Al Quoz is a breath of artistic relief. I made my way down there to visit the LawrieShabibi gallery recently, and the industrial site wasn't hard to find much to my surprise and that of many out-of-towners who specifically seek this place out to satisfy their interest in art tourism. The gallery which was co-founded in 2010 by Asmaa Al-Shabibi who was the managing director of Art Dubai in 2007 and William Lawrie, previously the director of contemporary Middle Eastern art at Christie's. Along with

the other kids on the block, the gallery is a reference to Dubai-ans' rising interest in not only contemporary art, but unconventional settings and spaces for cultural expression. The venue is a warehouse which makes up the identity of the gallery, by design or default, somehow alot of the artists they work with are actually diaspora artists and somehow that resonates with the co-founders. "Asmaa is from Bahrain and spent most of her childhood in London and I'm from London and I've spent a lot of my time since I was a

teenager in the Middle East," says William to confirm this. "Identity is a big theme, he states, especially for the first generation who find themselves inbetween, brought up in the Middle East and living in the west." The latest addition to their list of artists and exhibitions is Larissa Sansour who embodies the concept of identity by switching into fictional dimensions and borrowing heavily from the language of film and pop culture to creature a dystopian atmosphere.

Larissa and the Beanstalk

Nation Estate is a high production installation that comprises seven photographs and a sci-fi short film that is for the most part CGI-based. The project came together with the help of a big team, involving animators, cinematographers, a costume designer, a ceramist, a music composer, a sound artist and many more. Larissa herself, despite not liking the idea of appearing in film, was the protagonist of this production due to budget restrictions. Appearing in her own films later became a signature of her work, an "artistic dare," as she calls it. Her work as a whole is one big "dare," daring corporations, governments and even people to acknowledge the neglected consequences of unjust politics. Larissa strongly believes that art is potent when it comes to politics and when played right and according to its own terms, it can play a major role as a political tool. Her work has always been inspired by the situation in the Middle East and Nation Estate is directly informed by the events of recent years, specifically the Palestinian bid for full membership at the UN. "With Israeli settlement activity confiscating more and more Palestinian land, it struck me that for a Palestinian state ever to materialize, one would have to think vertically. This thought was the starting point for the Nation Estate project," she states.



Poster, 2012



Even though I appreciate the fact that works of art ignite in every individual a subjective interpretation that is shaped by personal experiences and perspectives, this couldn't stop me from wanting to dig deeper into Larissa's psyche. Ahead of her first solo exhibition at the gallery, I had a heart-to-heart about the themes that dominate her work: Home and identity. The "ultimate fighting champions" that battle it out in the inner conflict that takes place on a daily basis in the minds of displaced populations. Choosing to willingly live a nomadic lifestyle driven by curiosity and a craving for exploration, and being forcefully detached from a homeland as a result of war, political intentions or instability are two very different ends on the "globalization" spectrum. I refer to the concept of "globalization" to refer to the ease of transportation, amongst other advances in humanity, as one of the factors that have not only familiarized people from different cultures to one another but revolutionized ideas of the self. As if the Id, ego and superego didn't already have a hard time getting along with one another; today with displacement thrown into the mix, this little trio has bigger fish to fry. Larissa has long since come to terms with the fact that her identity is manifold and that it is something to embrace rather than lament. "In a world that is changing rapidly, she says, so many people find themselves struggling to adapt a more multi-faceted identity." Based between London and Copenhagen today, she carries with her a narrative that serves as the base of her identity. Like the carry-on that is wheeled around by her protagonist from floor to floor, a possible statehood for her people, whether

it be in the form of a skyscraper or a planet in space, is an idea she conveniently finds by her side at all times. As a child of a diaspora myself and a third generation descendant of genocide survivors, my thoughts are now glaring at this small bag with x-ray vision and a certain familiar announcement echoes in my head as a I write these words: "Any belongings that are left unattended, will be taken away by airport security." Let us take a look now into Larissa's precious bag and its components that she passionately guards and preserves through her work of art.

As a multicultural artist who lived in many different cities including Copenhagen, New York and now London, the motive behind your work still stems from your place of birth, the Middle East. Do you see this as your narrative, a personal story that is the permanent inspiration behind who you are and the work that you do?

The Palestinian experience is varied and to relate to only those who live in Palestine as representatives of Palestinian identity would only be covering a fraction of what informs Palestinian reality. Many Palestinians who were forced to leave their country are still considered stateless in some countries that they fled to or are not fully integrated in others. This is also largely due to the Palestinian psyche itself and its understanding of itself as citizens in flux who are ultimately waiting for their right to return home. In that way, the Palestinian Diaspora



is as central to the Palestinian identity as those who live in Palestine. In my case, I was born in Jerusalem and grew up in Bethlehem, and only recently did I get a foreign passport besides my Palestinian passport. So that identity has always informed who I was, at least on paper.

How do you position yourself in contrast to other Palestinian artists in this day and age who share similar points of interest?

I think the new generation of Palestinian artists is very inspiring in that many are trying to find very innovative ways of addressing an age-long problem. I think artists can only address and talk about the context they appear in and it is clear that it is impossible to avoid the political problem they find themselves in on a daily basis. My work is very much influenced by my background and by the fact that I grew up in Palestine. I have been living abroad for a long time and I suppose I am very interested in spinning a different narrative for Palestine, not only for people outside of Palestine but also for within Palestine. I think former ways of addressing the occupation and the violation of human rights have reached an impasse and the Palestinian question has reached a saturation point to many, and that's why it is vital to find a new way to address the issue. In my work I am not longer focused on

providing information or shedding light as to what is going on, raising awareness in the traditional or acquiring sympathy, but I am more interested in generating a desire and interest from outside audiences to engage with the Palestinian dialogue on equal terms.

How do you feel when you move from the West to East, then East to West?

It just becomes second nature navigating two different realities, but it also underlines how certain perceptions of the other are a result of cocooning or an inability to think outside of set values and routines. And this goes for both sides, whether they are defined

as traditions, religion, political systems or cultural identities.

Nation Estate has many references to elements of culture, including national dishes, dining customs, and physical landmarks. What do tradition and culture mean to you?

It is a very interesting question, because although Nation Estate is heavily laden with elements of tradition and culture, such as food, embroidery, national symbols and geographical landmarks, all these are contextualized in an unfamiliar setting or a posited space. The film is saturated with



symbolism and clichés putting the Nation Estate building on a par with a national museum in which those elements retain their identified meaning, yet cease to have any real function beyond that. Nation Estate sees the state of Palestine to be either planted in a relic past or firmly looking towards the future, but never actually seeing the present as a viable condition.

Do you think the concept of home is still a traditional one today?

It seems to me that our generation considers home to be any place where they are hooked to the internet, and there is some truth to that. We are more and more copies of technology. I often want to google my keys when I can't find them and it takes me by surprise when I realize this can't be done. Nevertheless as we are also human beings, we do need physical spaces to inhabit, and for many this is as far as home goes.

Your film A Space Exodus was nominated in the short film category at the Dubai International Film Festival. In this piece of art, the quest for a new Palestinian homeland sends an astronaut all the way to the moon. What type of feedback are you expecting from Nation Estate in Dubai and the Gulf in particular?

A few years ago my work was nominated for a prize supported by the clothing brand Lacoste. My nomination was later revoked because the work I submitted was deemed too political. The story of the censorship went global, and from the media frenzy that followed the museum issued a public statement siding with the artist and dropping their partnership with the corporate sponsor. The museum announced that they decided to cancel the prize to defend artistic freedom of expression.

During that period I received a lot of support from the Emirates and particularly Dubai from within and outside the art world. People said that the incident felt like a small victory for art and Palestine. It was an incredible outcome and I received a lot of overwhelmingly positive feedback worldwide. So I am quite excited about my show in Dubai as so many asked me when the work will arrive there and I am happy it finally will be exhibited there.



Your work presents a satirical exaggeration of accepted forms of reality and touches upon elements of metropolitan living. i.e (enamoration with international cuisine (Sushi ad) and living in skyscrapers.) Do you see satire and humor as a defense mechanism for people who are helpless in the face of injustice?

I don't see my work as running away from problems or a way out from a dreary reality. On the contrary, even though my work posits a new space and builds different worlds, it is very much based on the current political reality in Palestine. Even if some pieces of mine may have a humorous undertone, I see them as essentially dystopian.

By resorting to science fiction, Nation Estate continues a path laid out a couple of years ago. In several pieces over the past years, I have been exploring not only the sci-fi genre, but also the comic book superhero. Both forms have an inherent ability to communicate the most fundamental ambitions of a people or a civilization in a way that is naturally inspired by, but never hampered or restricted by a non-fictional reality. Also, despite its high production value and glossy imagery, sci-fi tends to allow for a specific kind of almost nostalgia framing of the topic at hand. Even the slickest sci-fi almost invariably carries within it a sense of retro, ideas of the future tend to appear standard and cliché at the same time as they come across as visionary. In the case of Palestine, there is an eternal sense of forecasting statehood, independence

and the end of occupation. The ambitious ideas that we hope to achieve have long since become so repetitive that the odd mix of nostalgia and accomplishment that the sci-fi genre often embodies lends it itself well to the topic.

Speaking of skyscrapers, which are a fairly new urban concept in the Middle East and are mostly limited to the Gulf states; how much are you inspired by architecture, and what does urbanism mean to you?

The meaning of architecture in the Palestinian context is multi-layered. Israeli settlements eating away at Palestinian land, for example, are incongruous to the land, they feel as artificial buildings that were built overnight and did not grow organically with the history of the place, which is of course also the case. But it is amazingly how architecture can tell that story so blatantly. Architecture in Palestine creates facts on the ground, so it constitutes a political power game. For me, Nation Estate, although fictional, claims a real space in the Palestinian psyche. I am very interested in mythology and how fiction can just mimic a certain national dream. Architecture also creates context in which values and meanings of certain concepts or elements get completely transformed. ♥

Text by Houry Seukunian

The Nation Estate series will be exhibited at the Lawrie Shabibi gallery from September 9 till November 12, 2013