

SCIENCE FICTION

AN INTERVIEW WITH LARISSA SANSOUR BY KHALED SADIYYAH

There is no greater example of the globalized world we currently live in, than two Palestinian expatriates sitting in a French bakery in the Western part of central London, trading stories of their recent experiences of visiting the now apartheid Palestine. Listening to Larissa Sansour, a Palestinian-born visual artist, describing her upbringing in Bethlehem and her fond memories of Jerusalem is quite refreshing as she describes a very different society from what we know. She makes frequent visits back to her hometown, and deals with frustrations of the arduous commute. She tells me that it is difficult to imagine Palestine existing as it once was, "it's impossible due to the settlements that are continuously built. They create such a claustrophobic feeling to the existing Palestinian cities." Larissa has used her creative abilities to breathe new life into the overly discussed topic of the future of Palestine. With her adept and visually intriguing photography and videos, she invokes a new perspective on an alternative vision.

Currently, she is showcasing her solo exhibition, Science Faction, at Lawrie Shabibi in Dubai, which includes her recent work in the Nation Estate. Larissa explains that she called her exhibition "Science Faction," after the phenomenon that references actual and true scientific discoveries that are so hard to believe that they are commonly mistaken for fiction. Her work deals with dueling themes, reality vs. fiction and utopia vs. dystopia, and attempting to blur the lines between them.



Olive Tree ▶

“You cannot have a horizontal expansion due to those ‘facts on the grounds,’ so the only solution would be to go vertical.” Larissa Sansour

Tower Lobby ▶



◀ Bethlehem Floor



◀ Jerusalem Floor

KS: How did you get the idea for the Nation Estate project?

LS: I looked at the current discussion of Palestine and found that people usually speak about the beauty of the past and the yearning to return home in the future. However, it is incredibly difficult to see that happening because you have ‘facts on the ground,’ you have thousands of people living in those settlements. What will you do with them? If Palestinians were to return to their original home you will cause another major exodus, this time with the Israelis being kicked out.

This is what I address with Nation Estate. If you want to consider having a viable Palestinian State in the future, it is difficult to imagine how that would happen. You cannot have a horizontal expansion due to those ‘facts on the grounds,’ so the only solution would be to go vertical. This is how I came up with Nation Estate, where I imagined the entire Palestinian population housed in one huge skyscraper, where you have each different city existing on different floors. The elevator would essentially take you from city to city, thereby removing the need for checkpoints. Although it can be seen as a utopia for

Palestinians where they finally have a state and the complete freedom to move around within it, this can also be seen as a dystopia because the tower takes away from the organic culture and adds quite a modern and sterile environment.

KS: It’s interesting that you acknowledge that this rise of a modern, glass and steel structure would lead to sacrificing an organic identity, since this is what has been criticized of the architectural boom in the Middle East.

LS: This is quite possibly a universal angst. I mean I always ask myself about the future of humanity and how we can progress.

KS: Several images from the Nation Estate project portray the city, where the skyscraper is located, as quite dystopic. Is this meant as a symbolic reference or is this the future of the city that you envision?

LS: It’s an imprisonment isn’t it? The whole population of a nation is essentially imprisoned in one skyscraper. You’re providing a comfort for the people





Film production images

the Dome of the Rock from one of the floors. I can't help but think how this project would develop? I mean, the tower doesn't continue infinitely.

LS: No of course not. It begins as one tower and how I envisioned this progressing would be with new buildings being built as annexes of the original tower. And that is how the organic growth comes in. A series of chaotic extensions where the overall exterior evolves into something grotesque, while the interior remains ordered and organized.

KS: That's incredible. Where did you get the idea for this? Did you research any architecture at all?

LS: Well I drew my inspiration from cities such as Gotham City. That was what I was aiming for in the beginning. Looking at the dark and futuristic landscape of spaces and towers. But I thought it would be a stronger point by having a single skyscraper.

KS: And the recent rise in skyscraper cities of the last decade must have had some influence on the project.

LS: Well, yes. These cities have a forest of towers, which seem to grow overnight. They all look the same, and there's something cold and quiet about them. They are scary because they are so devoid of soul. And even though I wanted the setting to be quite futuristic and sci-fi, I wanted there to be life within the Nation Estate. This is why you will see, in some instances, the olive tree growing inside one of the city floors. It represents something organic, growing and breaking through the cold concrete.

by allowing them a freedom they don't currently have, but then their views outside of this tower are of the land where they once lived. It becomes a painful reminder.

KS: That's almost the case today, with the wall and checkpoints constantly reminding them where they can and cannot go.

LS: Exactly. And it was a conscious decision I made to include the city of Jerusalem as part of the Nation Estate, not as a replacement but as an extension of the old city they once had.

KS: There's a strong sense of poetry in that, especially since there's a view of

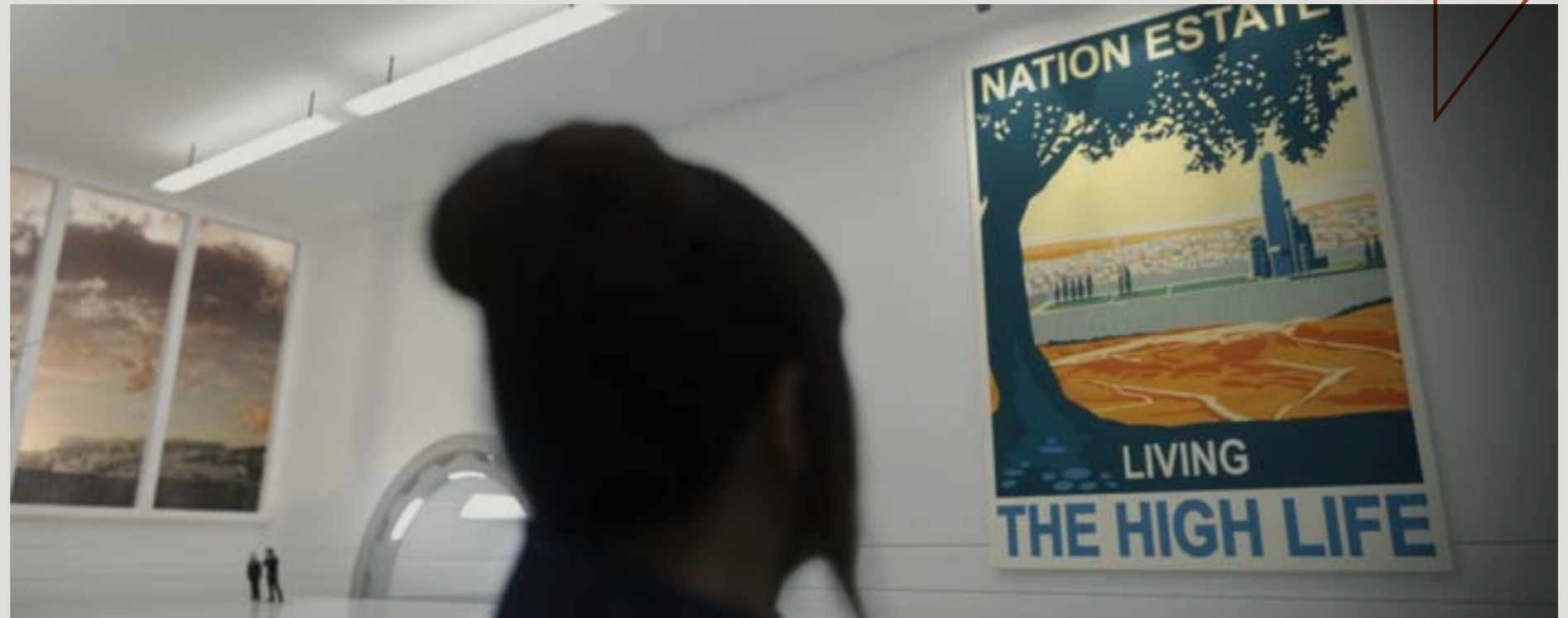
Lobby and poster ▷

KS: But why did you choose such a futuristic and sci-fi approach?

LS: There's something about the sci-fi genre that's very reminiscent to me about the Palestinian problem. While I was working on the project I tried to break away from the cliché of how the future is represented. But the more I avoided the typical futuristic aesthetic the less it looked like the future. When speaking about Palestine, we always speak about the past, how we were kicked out and the creation of Israel. Or we talk about our independence and having a better future where we return home. It's always the same conclusion: it was better before and it will be better, hopefully, later. But we never speak about the present.

What's happening in Palestine right now is not happening anywhere else. You cannot imagine it happening anywhere else. The situation is so surreal. It only made sense to me, and it seems more honest, to speak about it in surreal terms. Rather than use a typical documentary style that has already been done. Of course, documentaries are important but we are dealing with an audience that has become somewhat immune to all these documentaries due to the amount that have dealt with the same issue. I felt that there was a need to find a different way of addressing the current situation.

KS: That's very true. Personally, I believe we get so desensitized when we hear a news story about Palestine because it's been happening for so long and the situations get reported in the same way.



LS: This is why I made a very serious decision to stylize all the visuals to be as over the top as I could. The production had to be very glossy and I tried to emulate a Hollywood feature. I also wanted to challenge the idea of what a Middle Eastern artist should produce. Usually, I'm asked to showcase work from handheld cameras and talk about miserable and empty spaces in the desert with people carrying guns. It was very important for me to prove that there is more than the erroneous image of Palestine portrayed in the news.

KS: I've seen similar situations with architectural projects, where Western clients throw an Islamic pattern on a façade and call it "cultural" as if they know what the Middle Eastern culture is all about.

LS: That's funny, it even happens in architecture.

KS: Definitely. Now, since you reimagined my favorite graphic about Palestine, the Franz Kraus "Visit Palestine" poster from 1936, can you tell me about your thoughts on including it in your project.

LS: The whole project is essentially about 'building facts on the ground'.

KS: You mean the settlements or...?

LS: I'm talking about the idea that out of a myth you can build reality. It's interesting how fiction and reality relate to one another. We often think that fiction is extracted from or mimics reality, but it is in fact the other way around. In the digital age now, reality is constantly trying to keep up with fiction. Even when that fiction seems too wild and too crazy to ever become possible.

For me to see the "Visit Palestine" poster,

it was made more than a decade before 1948 and it was still called Palestine back then and it's in fact a Zionist poster. And that phrase "a land without people for a people without land" was used to establish a Jewish state within Palestine. Many foreigners actually believe that Palestinians were never there and that they came later. In this way you can see how a poster was used to create a country for Jews from all over the world, comes across as a fantastical project that seems too impossible to pull off.

KS: Do you mean for your project to be a literal solution?

LS: No not at all, I mean it would be quite sad if this is the solution. But what I want is for Palestinians to stop victimizing themselves and think of a way to 'build facts on the ground,' even if the reality of the fiction seems too impossible. □