



## Anatomy of an Artwork: Larissa Sansour's *In Vitro*, 2019

The London-based Palestinian artist explores the metaphorical questions facing her homeland in this black-and-white sci-fi film

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### **The cement garden ...**

In a bunker, a young woman in minimalist utility wear visits the facility's dying founder. Their sharp-edged concrete home is a sterile limbo, but its purpose is to house a huge, unseen orchard for a future world following an unspecified apocalypse. In the 28-minute, black-and-white film's lushly shot opening, a terrifying, oily, blood-black flood has overwhelmed the streets of Bethlehem, artist Larissa Sansour's childhood city.

### **Backward and forward ...**

But what kind of seeds are they sowing there? The two women - Dunia, played by Palestinian actor Hiam Abbass (*Succession*'s stepmom Marcia) and Alia (Baghdad Central's Maisa Abd Elhadi) - have rather different ideas about how to move forward. Now that the world outdoors is a blank canvas, should they shirk the oppressive weight of the past and start anew, as the younger Alia argues? Or must they remember not only to maintain who they were, but to avoid making the mistakes of earlier generations, as Dunia implores from her deathbed?

### **Going global ...**

Shot between the UK and Palestine and performed in Arabic, the 2019 film, which Sansour co-directed with her partner Søren Lind, was commissioned for the Danish Pavilion at last year's Venice Biennale. The situation facing Palestinians, caught, like the women, between "what was and what's to come", is clearly high on the artist's agenda. Yet she has kept these ruminations on exile and national identity open-ended enough to have global resonance. *In Vitro* is the latest Covid-pertinent art to be seen online.

### **What survives of us is love ...**

The film really delivers when it moves beyond the Socratic dialogue to strike at the heart rather than the mind. As a clone "engineered from the remains of those we left behind", Alia literally lives with someone else's memories. When we see Dunia watching a young girl play in her lost home, it's clear who those memories first belonged to. Thanks in no small part to the magnetism and subtlety of Abbass's performance, the sight of this bereft mother with a solitary suitcase in the dusty landscape, simply closing her eyes, speaks to the ages.

*In Vitro* is screening until Wednesday 27 May at [spikeisland.org.uk](http://spikeisland.org.uk)

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- Art and design
- Anatomy of an artwork
- Video art
- features