





REALITY *CHECKPOINT*

KHALED JARRAR



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With a practice that highlights the dilemma of an artist working in a troubled zone, Khaled Jarrar has been on both sides of the front line. **Rania Habib** delves into the history that forms his sharp view of the present.

Khaled Jarrar has just returned from a jaunt in Acre and Haifa when we catch up over a Skype call after the Eid Al-Fitr holidays. He travelled to the coast of Galilee – on the other side of the wall from where he lives – over the break with his two sons, Mohammed and Adam. Israeli authorities granted the family a permit to journey from the West Bank to Israel, and so the father jumped at the chance to give six-year-old Adam his first seaside experience. Jarrar resides and works in Birzeit, a town north of – and away from – the hustle and bustle of Ramallah. Although the Israeli occupation dictates his day-to-day life, Jarrar makes a very important distinction early on in our conversation: “I am not a Palestinian artist. I am an artist in Palestine.”

This is an ethos Jarrar explored in his debut documentary, *Infiltrators*. “In my film there are no stories about Palestine,” he explains, “but rather, stories about people and their experiences of trying to defy an obstacle [in this case, the separation wall].” The road movie-type production won the 2012 Dubai International Film Festival Muhr Arab Documentary Prize and the Gold Hugo for best documentary at the Chicago International Film Festival, among other accolades. “However, just like there is a wall between Mexico and the USA, there is one here,” he notes. The fact that Jarrar is almost pragmatic about the highly controversial 500-kilometre long (and growing) wall that cuts through the West Bank is slightly unnerving – yet central to his practice.

Though the reality of life under occupation is not unique to Palestinians, they live in conditions that can be impossible to comprehend unless experienced at first-hand. To do just that, the multimedia artist’s first solo at London’s Ayyam Gallery in 2013, *Whole in the Wall*, featured a site-specific installation of a concrete wall extending along the length of the space. It confronted visitors, who could only enter the gallery by climbing through



Opening pages: Installation view of *Whole in the Wall* with the work *The Apartheid Wall* at Ayyam Gallery, London, 2013.

(Facing page) Installation view of *Whole in the Wall* in London with (left) installation detail. Untitled. Archival print on cotton. 76 x 100 cm.

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a hole shaped like a map of Palestine. Other featured works included some from the ongoing *Concrete* series, for which Jarrar surreptitiously chisels concrete from the separation wall, grinds it down to dust and mixes it with fresh materials to create sports paraphernalia such as footballs and ping-pong rackets, and more recently, food items such as the traditional Palestinian *kaak* bread. “We have to remove this wall with our own hands, and not wait for anyone to bring it down,” he says. “I examine how to avoid creating waste and instead, create art objects and sell them.” The dialogue about possession, reclamation, the suffocation of Palestinian life and upcycling in a war economy is loud and clear. And so, though Jarrar is not a “Palestinian artist”, he is, very clearly, an artist who is deeply influenced by Palestine.

VIVE LA RÉSISTANCE

Born in Jenin in 1976, Jarrar grew up flying kites, picking mushrooms in the winter and harvesting watermelons with his grandmother in the summer. When the first Intifada erupted

in 1987, the young boy threw stones at Israeli soldiers, aimed the slingshot he had carved himself at them and defied curfews that sometimes lasted 20 days in order to deliver the bread his mother baked for the fighters on the streets. “Even though I was a child, I felt like I was a patriot and that I was fighting for freedom,” he recalls. Jarrar painted revolutionary graffiti on the walls of Jenin, which his father, along with other town elders, was forced to whitewash when Israeli soldiers came knocking in the middle of the night, searching for culprits.

The way in which Jarrar combated subjugation back then is mirrored in the way he resists it today. In June of this year, Jarrar took to the Wall – in broad daylight – to paint a rainbow flag on a section near the infamous Qalandiya checkpoint, in response to the US Supreme Court decision to legalise same-sex marriage. *Through the Spectrum* was quickly whitewashed by conservative residents who deemed his support of LGBTQ rights shameful and threatened to kill him. Though Jarrar was reacting to the news, he was more importantly

drawing attention to the fact that Palestinians – also an oppressed group of people – continue to fight for their very own rights. “Before the rainbow became a symbol for gay rights, it was a symbol for freedom. This was my call for freedom.”

In his late teens, Jarrar moved to Hebron (where he studied interior design) and later relocated to Ramallah, where he worked as a carpenter with his father – for all of three weeks. “He didn’t want to think outside the box,” he explains. “I wanted to see the world.” And so, in 1996, Jarrar smuggled himself into Nazareth, where he worked illegally as a carpenter and lived in a room with 10 others for 18 months. “One day, my mother said to me: ‘What are you doing? You are wasting your life!’ She knew I wanted to study art, and so she found me a job with the Palestinian police where I worked the night shift, and studied at An-Najah National University in Nablus during the day.” His stint with the police got him noticed by recruiters for Yasser Arafat’s Presidential Guard, who were growing weary of “short, fat, flat-footed soldiers



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who wore glasses". Jarrar was tall and fit, and was promptly hired. "Today, I think very consciously of that time and I try to reconstitute my past to be able to learn from it for my artworks."

It quickly becomes apparent that Jarrar's experience with the Palestinian Presidential Guard has deeply affected his practice. "When I was a soldier, I was a good shooter. Today, my brush is the pistol. I joined the army with a narrow vision and now it has exploded into so many other things." Though he holds a profound sense of respect for the late leader, he is now keenly aware of the shortcomings of Yasser Arafat's leadership, and more specifically, the complete failure of the Oslo Accords and the havoc they continue to wreak on the Palestinians. *The Ship of Return* is one of Jarrar's works in progress, a sculptural throwback to a woodcarving he made when he was 13 years old, for which he used a pair of old underpants to fashion the sail. "It's such a fitting artwork today, because we have failed to return to where we are from. It's also about the failure of the dream after Oslo and how everything changed, how our olive trees were removed to make way for concrete, and more concrete, everywhere."

ART OF WAR

The 36-day-long siege of Arafat's presidential compound during the Israeli Defense Force's Operation Defensive Shield in 2002 proved to be a turning point for Jarrar. He was injured by a dum-dum bullet on day two of the blockade and hospitalised for the remainder of the incursion. This was a critical time for the artist, who began drawing parallels between his experience during the first Intifada as a child, and the second Intifada as a soldier. "I was fighting the occupation

Facing page: *Football*.
2012. Cement sculpture.
23 cm diameter.

Above: *Ping Pong
Racket & Ball*. 2013.
Reconstituted concrete
from *The Apartheid Wall*.
24 x 15 cm.



again, but this time with Kalashnikovs," he says. "Still, the stone was mightier than the rifle. I began to address my emotional scars and weaknesses through art." Jarrar rekindled his first passion, photography, and in 2007 enrolled in the Contemporary Visual Arts programme at the International Academy of Art in Ramallah.

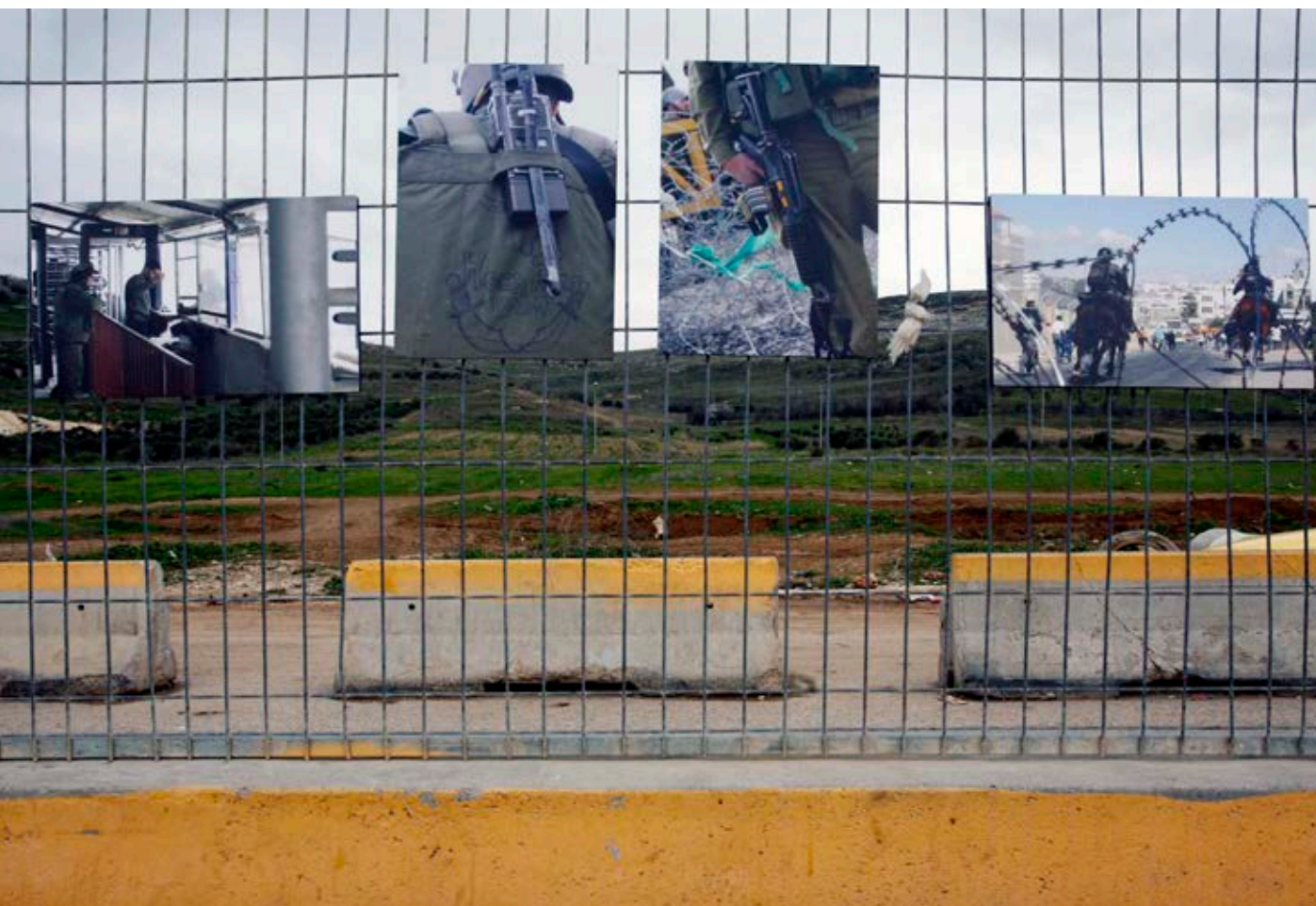
The siege also put him in direct contact with the Israeli army. Jarrar was wearing a helmet he had bought off an American journalist when he came into the line of fire. "Helmets were not provided for us," he says. "What was extra weight for someone ended up saving my life, because the bullet hit my helmet." During his solo show, *That Thou Canst Not Stir a Flower Without Troubling of a Star*, at Art Bärtschi & Cie in Geneva earlier this summer, Jarrar presented *Ice Helmet*, an ice sculpture of the protective headgear placed inside a refrigerator.

This was an exhibition that highlighted Jarrar's transition from fighter to artist, where he also performed *Gently I Press The Trigger*. He first carried out the piece years ago alone in a studio in Ramallah, when he closed the windows and soundproofed the room with egg cartons and fired shots into bottles of paint, which spilled onto canvases. He later exhibited the resulting abstract works at Gallery One in Ramallah and Galerie Polaris in Paris, but it was his performance of this work at Art Bärtschi & Cie in May that attracted worldwide attention, as well as an investigation by the police, despite Swiss law allowing a person to fire their own handgun in a private space. The private performance was shrouded in security, ensuring the 85 guests were safe while he fired 21 bullets; the opening the following day was

attended by close to 2,500 people. "I didn't take on this performance because I am Palestinian, but because I was a soldier," says Jarrar. "I could have been a soldier anywhere. This was an experiment in how to use your abilities, even dangerous ones, to make something that adds value and gets a message across."

BREAK ON THROUGH

The performance has once again put his name in the headlines, as did his failure to travel to New York in July 2014 to attend *Here and Elsewhere*, a milestone group exhibition at the New Museum where *Infiltrators* was screened, and *No Exit*, his project at the Whitebox Art Center. Israeli immigration authorities cited "security reasons" for refusing to let him travel out of the West



Facing page: Detail from *Live and Work in Palestine* series, 2013. Postage stamp print on sticker, and banner print on PVC. Variable dimensions.

Left: Untitled work from *At The Checkpoint* series, 2007. C-print. 45 x 30 cm.

All images courtesy Ayyam Gallery, Dubai/Beirut/London

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Bank, an excuse those with Palestinian travel documents are all too familiar with. One of Jarrar's earliest works, *Live and Work in Palestine*, examines Palestinians' deep-seated attachment to these travel papers.

The project began at Al-Mahatta Gallery – a 650-square-metre empty car park in the centre of Ramallah – where Jarrar impersonated the role of the authority who grants permission to foreigners to reside and work in Palestine. He created a simple stamp – one that would change as the project evolved from a simple logo bearing the words ‘State of Palestine’ to an image of a Palestine sunbird and a jasmine flower – which he printed on people's passports. “You can come into Ramallah with no sign that you've ever been here, except from Israeli immigration,” explains

Jarrar. “My stamp is a symbol that we too have a nation.” He stationed himself at the bus stop where visitors would arrive to Ramallah from Jerusalem; some refused to have their passports stamped, others hesitated. To date, he has stamped 700 passports, 23 of them Israeli. At the 2012 Berlin Biennale, Jarrar performed *Live and Work in Palestine* at Checkpoint Charlie, where he used official stamps issued by Deutsche Post. The project, he says, cost him very little, but its impact has been immeasurable.

As our three-hour Skype call draws to a close, Jarrar pulls up a guitar he made back in 1993. “It's one of the few things I've kept,” he says. “Today, I focus on memories of the things I used to do, and examine what links they have with the political situation. Kids do things that

relate directly to what is happening without being fully aware of it. For example, I couldn't buy a guitar because I didn't have the money, so I made one, even if it wasn't with the right wood or strings. It was a way of expressing resistance and refusing the occupation, even if I wasn't fully conscious of it.” Yet, he maintains he is not a political artist, but concedes that his art carries a heavy political slant. “I believe in art that brings important topics to the table, through which we can learn from our failures and cast a critical eye on ourselves. I want to go beyond the Palestinian authority, the occupation, the Arab or European systems, and anything that creates limits. I want to knock down the walls to voice my message as a Palestinian and as a human being living on this earth.”