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"Putting me in jail would be their biggest mistake" – Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar talks to Art Radar

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Khaled Jarrar may have knocked down Palestine's Separation Wall and rebuilt it in London but really, he insists, his art is more personal than political.

From 20 June to 3 August 2013, Khaled Jarrar's multimedia exhibition "Whole in the Wall" opens a dialogue between Ayyam Gallery visitors in London and the artist's subjects living in Palestine behind the Separation Wall, which has divided Israel from Palestine since the late 1990s.



Khaled Jarrar, Still from video "Concrete", 2012. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

Making the political personal

Khaled Jarrar works across a variety of media such as video, found objects and sculpture to explore the effects of conflict on humanity. Taking inspiration from his own experience of Palestine, the First and Second Intifada, and his role as a soldier in Yasser Arafat's Guard, Jarrar bases his artistic practice on the personal as much as the political.

"**Whole in the Wall**" sees the London branch of the **Ayyam**

Gallery divided by a wall made as a site-specific installation. The structure is formed from cement that was gathered back in Palestine by chipping away at the Separation Wall, a process that the artist documented in the video *Concrete*. The still untitled London wall creates two paths in the gallery space: one that circumvents the barrier and one that leads straight through it via a gap in the shape of Palestine cut into the concrete.

The same concrete chippings from the Separation Wall constitute the material for several casts of everyday sports equipment such as a football, shoes and a frisbee, and Jarrar's *Buddy Bear*, which is a satirical replica in form and name of the **140 United Buddy Bears**. Video works include the documentation of a game of badminton played between the artist and his friend over the Separation Wall, titled *BADminton*, and a looped clip from the documentary *Infiltrators*. An exploration of the lives of people attempting to negotiate routes between Israel and Palestine, *Infiltrators* was met with immense critical acclaim at its debut at the **Dubai International Film Festival 2012**.

Jarrar spoke to *Art Radar* about being a soldier in Arafat's Guard, chipping away at the Separation Wall and why, despite appearances to the contrary, there is no political agenda in his work.



View of the exhibition "At the Checkpoint", 2007, 41 C-prints, 45 x 30 cm, installed at the fence of the Israeli military checkpoints twice: at Hawarra checkpoint at the main entrance of Nablus and at Qa.

Sculpture and sport

What is your art background?

I studied Interior Design in Hebron in 1994, and in 2011 I graduated in Visual Art from the **International Academy of Art Palestine**.

And do you consider yourself a sculptor?

No, these are actually my first sculptures [for "**Whole in the**

Wall"]. I worked on them alone. I don't like to hire assistants. *Football* is the first object I made. I asked my son if I could have his football. I tore a hole in the fabric and filled it with cement. Then I took away the fabric. That is why you see the ropes there. I really wanted to have a personal story for the first object.



Khaled Jarrar, 'Football', 2012, concrete, 22 cm diameter. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

You work in different media. Can you describe the process of how you make a piece of work?

For me, it is about the concept. I study the concept and then I decide what media is needed.

Why does sport feature so heavily in "Whole in the Wall"?

I think sport is a very positive thing. Palestinians love sport. When I showed my son the football I had made from concrete, he told all his friends to come and see it. I want to make something visual that people will like. But in the end it is not an art object that could become a souvenir like the statues you see in the market.



Khaled Jarrar with 'Football', "Whole in the Wall", Ayyam Gallery, 2013. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

The Separation Wall

Let's talk a bit about the video work. When you were talking about *BADminton*, you said that there is a playfulness to the work, as well as seriousness. Might it be considered a political agenda?

No, there is no political agenda in my works. I will tell you a simple story. If I pour a glass of water and put it in a gallery with the label, 'Glass of Water from Palestine', this would be considered a political work for many reasons. Water in Palestine is a big issue. The main water resources are in Israel. The Israeli government controls the water. So the political issue is there already. But for the work, it only looks like there is a political issue.

If they put me in London, I would work with issues humanity faces here. I like to be serious with my work. I don't make works for fun. I don't make abstract paintings. I like to make works which are related to something.

In terms of the *BADminton* video, I wanted to express the sense of humour we have in Palestine.



Khaled Jarrar, still image from video 'Concrete', 2012. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

Can you talk a bit about the huge concrete wall standing in the Ayyam Gallery?

I cut pieces from the Separation Wall and I sent them to London with FedEx. You should have seen the FedEx worker's expression! Looking at boxes with 53 kilograms of pieces of the wall and having to ship them to London for all this money. They did ask about it. In London I smashed the pieces and mixed them into cement, which I then made into the wall.

I want to make the wall in Palestine less and less until it is destroyed. Now it's here in London, with a lot of attention around it. It's a good way to tell a story.

Do you want to destroy the wall with your art?

Artwork for me is like ringing the bell. Sounding the alarm. I want to draw people's attention to it. I am asking my friends, my family, everyone, to go and knock it down. We can only do it together.

You have mentioned the Berlin Wall in relation to the Separation Wall between Palestine and Israel, and that the Berlin Wall has become a load of souvenirs. Do you want the same for the Separation Wall?

No, I don't want this wall to become souvenirs. I am just thinking about the future of the wall, when it eventually comes down. It will not stay like this. In twenty years, twelve thousand years, I will tell my kids and teach my people about it.

That's why you see the olive tree in my works. It seems as though Mother Nature told us that this wall exists. But the tree tried to go through the heavy concrete. It is a symbol of hope.

I want the concrete from the wall to be used to build things humanity needs: hospitals and schools. In Gaza, they are not allowed to import materials for building with. They are using the materials from the destroyed houses.

When you chip away at the Separation Wall, you are breaking the law according to Israeli jurisdiction. Have you gotten in trouble for making these works? And if not yet, what if you did?

I have not been sent to jail yet! I am ready to take the risk. If you worry about risk, then you can't do anything. Whatever happens, they can't give me more than three or four months in jail. I can do projects in there. Putting me in jail would be their biggest mistake!



Khaled Jarrar, "Whole in the Wall", 2013, installation view. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

The artist in Palestine

I want to talk a bit about the *Infiltrators* film. In the clip from the film, shown in "Whole in the Wall", a microphone was passed under the gap in the wall. How much do you feel as though you were just watching people in their daily life, and how much did you feel as though you were involved? How much did these people become actors in a story?

Somebody said that my documentary films are made in the style of **Cinéma vérité**. They were almost right. *Infiltrators* is about ninety percent Cinéma vérité. I couldn't stop myself from being involved some of the time. It is really silly. In the scene shown in the gallery, I was crying while that was being shot. Whenever I see this scene, I cry. The mother in it died a few months ago. But when I am interviewed about the film I don't go into detail about the lives of these people.

Can you tell us about where you work?

My studio is in front of the Separation Wall. I didn't do this consciously. I was looking for a studio out of the city with no Internet, because if I had Internet I wouldn't work! I realised I had found a studio four hundred metres away from the wall. I did wonder whether it would be a good idea to take it. But it was such a good offer. I decided to take the studio, but that I wouldn't take journalists there. I didn't want them to misunderstand. There is nothing inspirational about this wall. It's something to displace.



And what about Palestine as an important context for your work?

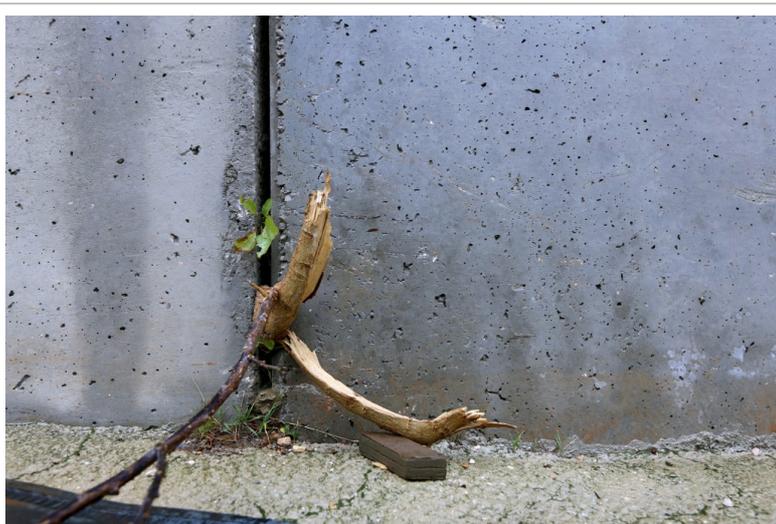
Palestine is only interesting to me in terms of the people who live there. I grew up in Palestine. I was eleven years old when the First Intifada happened and I realized that we were living under occupation. I went to the streets to throw stones at the Israeli army. This was not a game though. This was serious. These

people don't shoot rubber bullets, they shoot live bullets. And there weren't many journalists around. They were more in the northern area of the West Bank. We were isolated. No one heard our story. I was really angry when I realized that what we were doing was being ignored. We were resisting with strength: kids were faster than them. We made it hard! It was our lives at stake, our neighborhoods, our small roads.

Taking up video and photography is a new way to tell the story. That stone was a start, but my work reaches far more people than the stone. So I always try to look to the people of whom I am one. This story of people living under occupation.

Can you talk a little about the olive tree in *Untitled*?

Olive trees have been cut by the Israeli army to make way for the wall. The Palestinians have tried to re-farm the trees. The olive tree in *Untitled* is real. It really inspired me to see the strength of nature. There's no consciousness or agenda. All this tree wants is to search for air and water to survive. And this is us: we search for life.



Khaled Jarrar, 'Untitled', 2013, C-print Diasec mounting, 140 x 210 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Ayyam Gallery.

The future and the past

Where will you go next with your work?

I think my work with concrete has finished with this exhibition. I don't want to work with this forever. I have other projects in sketchbooks in the process of research and development, but I am quite stubborn when it comes to talking about them!

In terms of this project, I chiseled the wall in 2010, but the pieces of concrete stayed in my archive until July 2012. Then I redeveloped it. I didn't think the work was strong enough to exhibit as it was then. If the work doesn't represent my personal experience then I get rid of it.

I would like to make works related to my experience working as a soldier in the Presidential Guard [for President Arafat]. I worked as a soldier for eight years. I am interested in how important soldiers are to the system, to produce them. The army is an industry, controlled by the Israelis, the Americans, the Italians and the British. How the wall and the lives around it are toys.

I sent my film *Infiltrators* to the UN, since they claim to understand. I talked with their representatives about the people who have to go to Jerusalem to pray, to meet their friends, to work and to go to hospitals. They promised to give me money to support the film in 2011. In 2012 we had to sign a new contract and then again and again. I was certain the film would be successful, so I broke the connection with the UN. The UN had their own agenda.

Many people criticize me for showing Palestinians lying and stealing. But I want to show them as human. This is normality. Why should I show Palestinians as superheroes? We are not superheroes, believe me. We just want time and money.

Do you think your experience working with President Arafat is something that shows in your work?

That is what my producer believed. He told me that I am not just an ordinary filmmaker with a camera, that I am stubborn like a soldier, who has experience and a will to survive. You really need to know how to survive near the wall, surrounded by soldiers. The smugglers were scared to be filmed, too.

The art actually made me a soldier. I wanted to study art but I needed money to survive so I studied during the day and worked the night shift in the Guard. In 2002 I was shot by two 'dum dum' bullets. I was traumatized. I had no dreams until 2012. When I started dreaming again, I had nightmares.

Hannah Sender

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