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Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar stands by his wall installation, Ayyam Gallery. Photo: William Parry

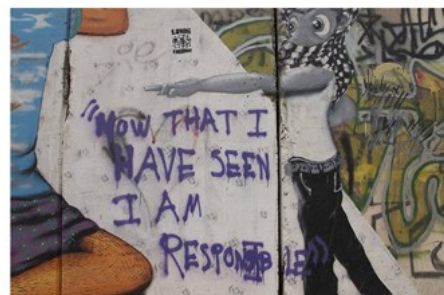
Palestinian artist brings wall to London

17 July 2013

Many Palestinians are uncomfortable with Westerners 'beautifying' Israel's illegal separation wall in the West Bank with street art. It should be left in its naked, brutal state as a stark reflection of those who imposed it upon them, they say. They don't want their children to see it as a thing of beauty.

At the same time, street artists like Banksy have transformed it into the world's largest protest banner, and any visitor to Bethlehem who strolls along it cannot help but be affected by the often powerful, humorous and thought-provoking images and comments left by thousands of people as an act of solidarity. Someone spray painted a patch of wall in Bethlehem in 2011 with, 'Now that I have seen, I am responsible', a pithy, resonating statement that encapsulates the potential of graffiti on the wall and which will linger in the mind of tourists long after they've said goodbye to the checkpoints and souvenir shops. If more people worldwide become aware of Israel's separation wall and the injustices it has created as a result of the layers of spray paint on it, is that 'beautification' a tolerable lesser of two evils?

Palestinian artist, Khaled Jarrar, is conscious of this dilemma. His first solo UK exhibition, *Whole in the Wall* is currently showing at the Ayyam Gallery in London and is a collection of photographs, video installations and sculptures. Some may say that Jarrar's work in this exhibition minimises the wall's devastating brutality by abstracting it into objects of art. However, creating them has involved Jarrar taking a hammer and chisel to the wall over months to gather kilogram after kilogram of concrete, which he has metamorphosed into these objects of resistance and political commentary. Indeed, 53 kg of original wall concrete has been 'reconstituted' in the exhibition's



most imposing sculpture, an 8-foot concrete high wall that runs almost the entire length of the gallery.

"Getting the concrete is a long process because I have to search for places where there are no soldiers or cameras," says Jarrar, leaning against the wall. "I go and find a place then chisel for 10 to 15 minutes to get 3-4 kg, then box it and put it in the car, and go again after several days."

Any Palestinian approaching the wall endangers their life. But Jarrar says it is therapeutic, and one of the looped video installations is nothing more than a video camera recording Jarrar, chiselling away. The sound of metal on concrete echoes relentlessly through the gallery, sounding of an obsession.

"Sometimes I feel relaxed, sometimes I'm scared," says Jarrar. "I do it spontaneously because it depends on how you feel. When I'm there it takes all my anger out, and it allows me to throw my anger against the wall and to show how ugly it is. The adrenalin is high but it is also physically exhausting. It takes mental and physical practice."

Its imposing presence in a gallery in central London is Jarrar's attempt to get Westerners to sense the wall's physical and mental brutality, and to think about its daily impact on life for Palestinians, from getting to work or school to retrieving a football that has been knocked over to the Israeli-patrolled side.

"It's important to have this exhibition here, with hundreds of people coming to see the wall, to experience it in the heart of London. We have to show the people in the West that this wall was built to separate, and to control land and water. It's not a security wall or it would have been built on the Green Line. On top of that, Palestinians manage to cross it daily to go to Jerusalem [in search of work]. It's not a security wall."

A report in July by the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) notes that the wall's route illegally annexes 9.4% of the West Bank, which includes some of the most fertile agricultural land and important water resources in the West Bank. It also states that between January and March this year, "at least 14,000 Palestinians without the required permits smuggled themselves every day into Israel to look for employment".

Jarrar knows the local people-smuggling trade very well. His documentary film, *The Intruders*, had its UK premier at the Edinburgh Film Festival earlier this month. In it, Jarrar follows hundreds of West Bank Palestinians who pay smugglers to get them access to Jerusalem. He accompanies labourers stealthily crossing fields in the darkness of early morning, anxiously awaiting instructions from the smugglers about when to race across roads or to hop into pre-arranged pick-up trucks. In other scenes, Palestinians – young and old, and with plastic bags over their feet – climb through a tunnel of sewage to squeeze through narrow openings in the wall in Beit Hanina, a suburb of Jerusalem.

The separation wall significantly impedes access to hospitals in East Jerusalem that Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza should have. Last year, 39,000 Palestinians were refused permits to get to hospital, according to the World Health Organization. The separation wall also delays ambulance journeys, with almost all ambulances from the West Bank having to stop at checkpoints to transfer critically ill patients 'back-to-back' to another ambulance on the other side of the checkpoint. Jarrar recounts a moving story of this impeded access to the Palestinian hospitals in occupied East Jerusalem.

"When I was following the Palestinians trying to cross to Jerusalem for the film, there was one driver I was with. There was a girl with her father and brother, and when they ran to the cars at the highway [that would smuggle them into Jerusalem], the girl fell and they had to carry her to the car. After that I lost track of them because they needed to run. I then asked the driver what the story was of this girl. He said she has cancer and needed treatment in a hospital in East Jerusalem. He said she had applied for a permit and the Israelis refused to give her permission, so the family had to smuggle her into Jerusalem."

The exhibition also includes large photos taken through gaps in the wall surrounding one elderly woman's home in Beit Hanina. Jarrar says that she has been cut off from neighbours and family, imprisoned by the wall, and these photos are key-hole apertures, like stolen glimpses, of her former neighbourhood beyond the wall. In *The Intruders*, Jarrar interviews the woman's daughter, who comes to visit her mother and, because of permit issues, is unable to physically visit her at her house. She is filmed passing a photo of the granddaughter under a large, metal section of the wall for her mother to see. It is also through this crack that they touch each other, their fingers embracing each other's.

Jarrar's exhibition contains several overtly Palestinian symbols. An olive tree trunk – one of tens of thousands of Palestinian olive trees uprooted to make way for the separation wall – stands in the middle of the floor on a white base. Jarrar took the trunk, cut it in half, and created a concrete mould for the one half, then combined it with the other (real) half.

One symbol that initially seems out of place is a 100 cm tall 'United Buddy Bear', reconstituted from concrete

from the separation wall. Jarrar says that the original concept for these bears came from Berlin following the collapse of the wall that divided the city throughout the Cold War. They have come to represent and promote tolerance, international understanding and the concept of different nations and cultures living in peace and harmony. An international tour of United Buddy Bears has taken place annually since 2002, with a different host country each year. In 2007, Israel hosted the United Buddy Bear exhibition in Jerusalem. Jarrar's Buddy Bear is an ironic broadside at the gaping hypocrisy of holding it in an occupied city, where Israel's separation wall was then being built, dividing communities from one another and stopping Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza from accessing East Jerusalem. The United Buddy Bears website says the tour has been set up because: "We have to get to know each other better ... [sic] it makes us understand one another better, trust each other more, and live together more peacefully."

Nothing compares, of course, with witnessing the separation wall, and the devastation it is causing, first hand. But for those who haven't yet, Jarrar's exhibition provides a taster that mixes the cruelty of the wall with Palestinian steadfastness, hope and wit.

He acknowledges that while there are still resilient pockets of resistance to the separation wall in communities around the West Bank, he says the work arose out of frustration at ways in which his fellow Palestinians have grown accustomed to the wall's presence and imposition, and complain about it rather than doing something meaningful about it.

"We see this wall everyday, it's in our faces, and we don't do anything but talk. Talking is not enough. We need to do something more effective. This anger should go somewhere. I am asking everyone in Palestine to go and chisel one kilogram or two kilograms. If 1,000 people did this, we would have several thousand kilograms. We will break this wall. This will happen, it will come – I don't know when, but it will."

Does life imitate art? Jarrar hopes so.

Whole in the Wall runs until 3 August

Ayyam Gallery
143 New Bond Street
London W1S 2TP

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