

RE-SPINNING VERSIONS





PRE SERVICE

OF THE SAME THREAD

LARISSA SANSOUR



NATION ESTATE	
1 DEAD SEA	16 TU
0 MAIN LOBBY	16 BE
1 SOUQ	17 JA
2 PERMITS & PASSPORTS	18 DL
3 HERITAGE MUSEUM	19 IDI
4 JERUSALEM	20 YA
5 RAMALLAH	21 KA
6 NABLUS	22 PL
7 GAZA	23 AS
8 QALQILYA	24 AL
9 JENIN	25 DE
10 HEBRON	26 HL
11 TULKARM	27 BI
12 BETHLEHEM	28 BA
13 JERICHO	29 SA
14 MEDITERRANEAN	30 NA

Nat Muller speaks with Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour, whose critical body of work exists between the familiar and the unknown, the playful and the political.



It has been a little over a year since Palestinian artist Larissa Sansour made headlines when she went public with French clothing brand Lacoste's censorship of her *Nation Estate* project for the prestigious Lacoste Elysée Prize, hosted by the Swiss Musée de l'Elysée in Lausanne. Following the barrage of press that the case received, the museum cancelled the whole competition. The experience, Sansour confides, has had a significant effect on how she makes work and on the network she garnered during the incident. "It was truly amazing to see how art can be a catalyst for political debate on such a wide and large scale," she says.

The political is indeed never far in Sansour's work, yet she approaches her subject matter in a way that is never didactic or reductive. On the contrary, Sansour has developed a unique visual language that is invested in depicting alternative imageries and multiple roles for Palestine and Palestinians with humour, wit, pop culture and popular cinema as her strategies of choice. In her work, she casts herself in unexpected roles: a Mexican gunslinger duelling with the Israeli separation wall in her video *Bethlehem Bandolero*; an elegantly dressed helmeted runner sprinting across the walled-in city of Bethlehem in the short clip *Run Lara Run*; or an intergalactic superhero saving the world in her book project *The Novel of Nonel and Vovel*. What binds all these diverse and often humorous, performances together is a refusal to be pigeonholed into Orientalist or other identitarian denominations (victim/terrorist/refugee/militant). What better strategy to offset clichés than quoting and actively inhabiting the grand trashy receptacle of hackneyed Western fears and desires: pop culture. For Sansour, "there is a sense of empowerment in using these visual forms associated with entertainment and humour to serve people a dose of stark political reality."

Whether she borrows from Spaghetti Westerns, American sitcoms, big brand advertising, horror films, or science fiction, Sansour is always sure to hybridise these elements with her own Palestinian experience and subjectivity. Her work is just accessible and comfortable enough to lure one in for the ride, but then takes one on a whole different journey altogether.

Opening spread:
Installation view of
Palestinians. 2010.
Vinyl. 30 x 24 x 18 cm
each. Editions of 500.
Image courtesy Galerie
Anne de Villepoix, Paris.

Facing page:
From top: *Nation Estate*
6 – *Food*, *Nation Estate*
1 – *Olive Tree* and
Nation Estate 3 – *Main*
Lobby. 2012. C-print. 60
x 120 cm each framed.
All editions three of five.
Images courtesy Galerie
Anne de Villepoix, Paris.



“The tug and pull between the personal and collective memory, I believe, is one of the central elements in my work.”

UMBILICAL TIES

Born in East Jerusalem to a Palestinian father and a Russian mother, Sansour grew up in Beit Jala in the West Bank, not far from Bethlehem. Her mixed heritage and polyglot upbringing make her an excellent candidate to inhabit the condition of the ‘in-between’ that has become the main plight of the Palestinian people, whether they live in the West Bank, Gaza or Jerusalem, within the 1948 borders, are refugees, or live in the Diaspora or in exile. Being ‘in-between’ having a state, a homeland, a nation is something that defines Palestine, or as Sansour puts it: “[The] eternal sense of forecasting statehood, independence and the end of occupation.” As such, her practice is about national and personal conceptions of home, or rather the friction between the stubborn insistence of longing for a home and homeland and the increasing impossibility of the latter within the current geopolitical configuration.

Perhaps this is why in her *oeuvre* there is an emphasis on domesticity and on the very nucleus of home: the family. Just as Sansour often scripts herself into her work, she also likes to cast her siblings in various roles. “In a lot of my work there is an emphasis on registering reality and keeping a record. I photograph and film

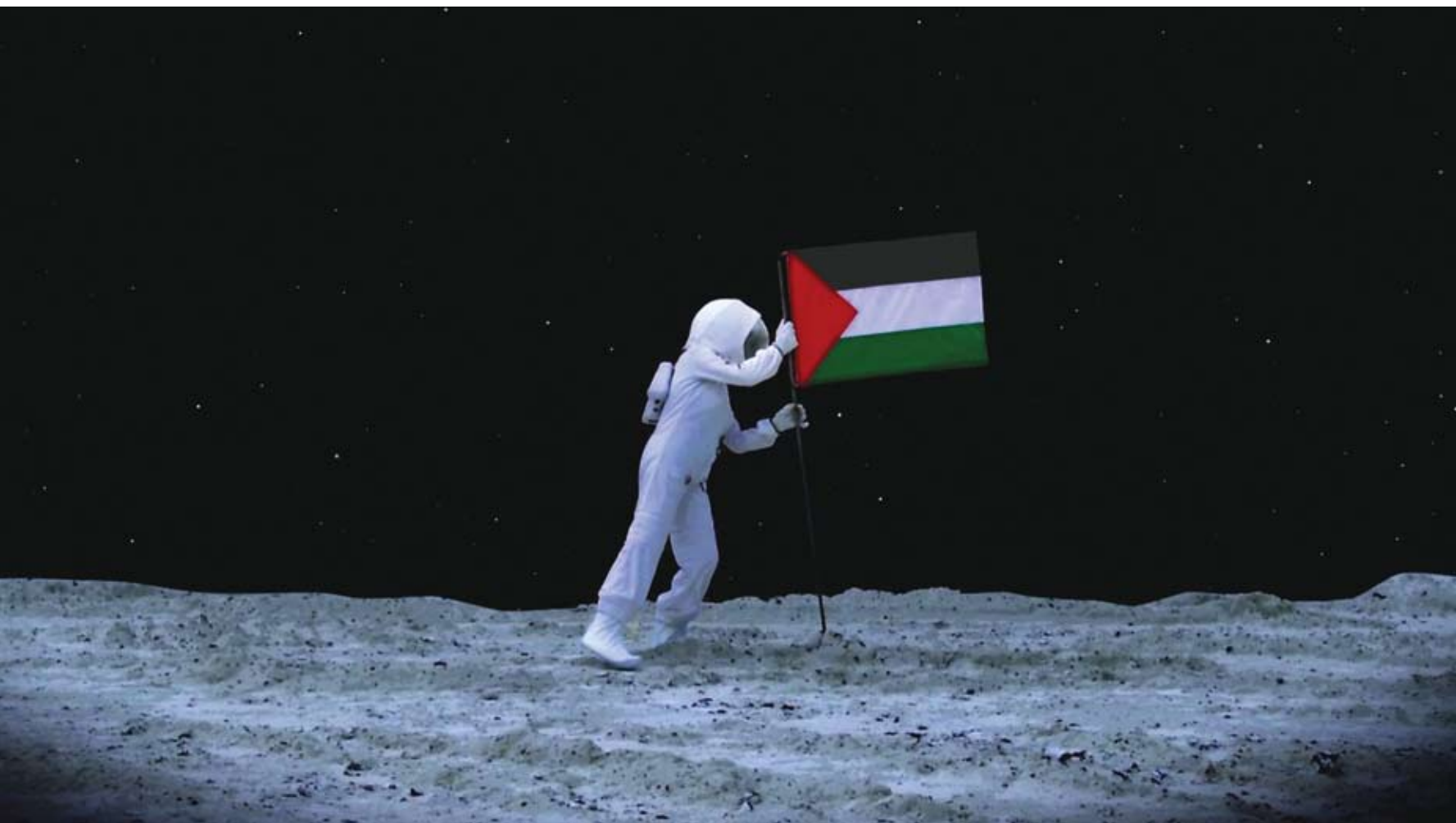
Palestinian cities, my family and myself almost as a record for ourselves in case we are never able to go back home again," she explains. Take for instance her 2006 video *Soup Over Bethlehem (Mloukhieh)* where the mundane setting of a family lunch on her parents' rooftop in Bethlehem over bowls of steaming *mloukhieh* – a traditional stew served with rice – becomes a vehicle to narrate life under Israeli occupation. The shaky black-and-white footage, with only the food in colour, hints that we, as viewers, are privy to an intimate document, a snapshot of a private family gathering that, due to curbs in mobility, is continuously at risk of being the last. As the conversation turns from the difficulty of obtaining *mloukhieh*, to its properties as an aphrodisiac and foreigners' dislike of the dish, details are introduced that position the conversation within a larger politicised context of territory, history, identity, ownership and geography. It shows how, in the Palestinian context, privacy is always contested and infringed upon: "The tug and pull between the personal and collective memory, I believe, is one of the central elements in my work," says Sansour.

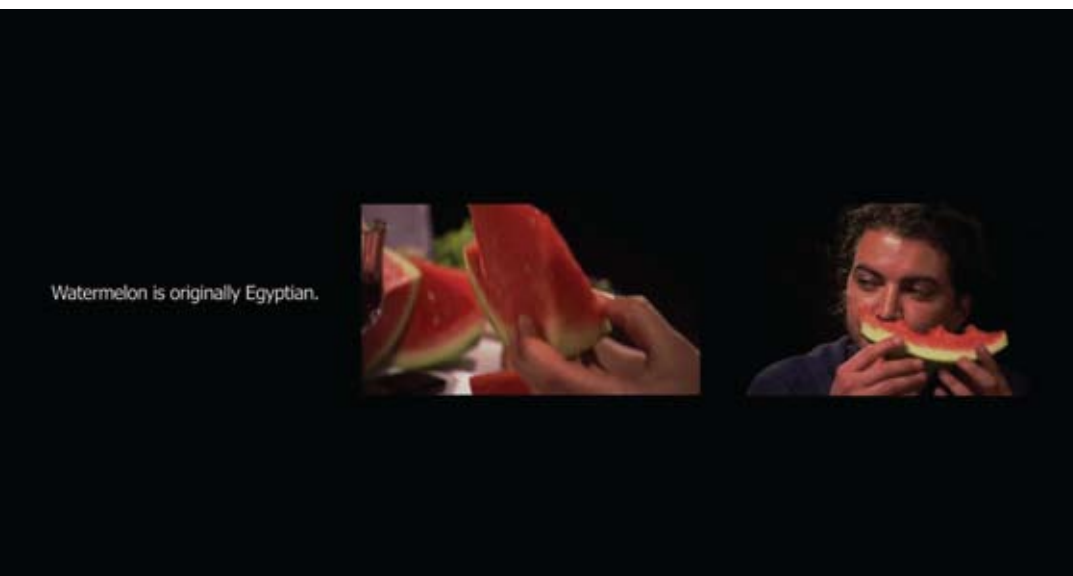
The motifs of family and food are continued in works like *Feast of the Inhabitants* and the three-

channel video installation *Trespass the Salt*, a collaboration with Lebanese artist Youmna Chlala. Here we see diners congregate around a lush and mouth-watering spread of regional delicacies in Beirut and Bethlehem respectively. The piece is edited as though the diners were having dinner together, a geo-political impossibility for these bordering territories. Flushed down with copious amounts of *arak* (an anise-flavoured alcoholic drink), topics of discussion fluctuate from the best season for lamb and the ontological meaning of stuffed vegetables, to sectarian issues for the Lebanese diners and the sense and nonsense of foreign NGOs in Palestine. The display of the piece suggests that geographical boundaries are being dissolved, yet the fragmented jump cuts of the visuals imply the opposite, making the differences between Palestinian and Lebanese national and political issues more explicit. Nonetheless, there is plenty of banter and self-irony in this piece. Speaking on the subject of humour, Sansour points out that "people tend to associate grave and serious with lecturing and moralising, whereas humour often carries that element of self-exposure, pointing fingers at yourself rather than at others and serving politics

Facing page:
Cairo Taxilogue. 2008.
Poster. 150 x 100 cm.

This page:
Still from *A Space Exodus*. 2009. Video.
5:24 minutes.





through such a filter simply makes both the work and the artist seem less uncompromising.”

Sansour employs humour tactically, yet a lingering sense of alienation and un-belonging runs through much of her work. In 1988, when many Palestinian schools closed under the First Intifada, she was sent to a boarding school in Northampton, England, at the age of 15. Periods of study in New York, London and Copenhagen followed, but Sansour has not been able to visit the city of her birth – Jerusalem – since 2006, when she last snuck in illegally. Now she has happily made London her home, but frequently returns to other parts of Palestine to underscore the difficulties of mobility and the increasing land grab Palestinians in the West Bank and the Diaspora are up against. This becomes forcefully clear in her more documentary-like work, such as *Severed Routes* and *Land Confiscation Order 06/24/T*. In the former, the travel hurdles for Palestinians are explained through firsthand accounts of the maze of checkpoints, settlement expansions and permits that Palestinians need to negotiate to get from point A to point B. The latter video is a requiem for a plot of family land seized by the Israeli army allegedly for “military purposes” to extend the separation wall cutting through the West Bank. The video documents the lush hills of that piece of land, Sansour’s brother and sister reminiscing about their grandmother and questioning how they can preserve, in memory or deed, this territory. In an act of performative mourning, her siblings wrap the small house perched on top of the hill in black cloth. It not only signifies the loss of ownership, but also a loss of place and identity. “When you lose your land, the bereavement is accumulative,” says Sansour. “The predicament of displacement and uprootedness ends up forming its own brand of collective identity.”

“When you lose your land, the bereavement is accumulative.”



Facing page:
Above: Still from *Soup Over Bethlehem (Mloukhiéh)*. 2006. Video. 9:30 minutes; Below: Larissa Sansour and Youmna Chlala. Still from *Trespass the Salt*. 2011. Three-channel video. 11 minutes.

This page:
Larissa Sansour and Oreet Ashery. *The Novel of Nonel and Fovel*. 2009. Graphic novel.

All images courtesy the artist and Sabrina Amrani Art Gallery, Madrid, unless otherwise specified.

OUTER AND INNER SPACE

In recent projects such as *Nation Estate* and *A Space Exodus*, Sansour draws heavily on the tropes of science fiction and futurism, a genre that lends itself well to issues of territory, history, geo-politics, identity, colonisation, occupation, nation(alism), alien(ation), but also possibility, hope and resistance. She notes that both works represent loss “as a larger-scale manifestation of a loss already felt for decades and decades”. These two works simultaneously query the meaning of replacing that loss by inadequate substitutes or proxy experiences. “In *A Space Exodus*, the quest for a new Palestinian homeland sends an astronaut to the moon, the ultimate displacement, an ex-terrestrial exile, whereas the *Nation Estate* project accelerates the land grab scenario to a point where a Palestinian state in present-day Palestine can only be realised vertically, as a skyscraper,” explains Sansour.

Both projects propose scenarios that are fantastical, but eventually not viable. *A Space Exodus* abandons the idea of a Palestinian geography on planet Earth altogether and seeks an intergalactic solution by travelling into outer space and ostentatiously planting a Palestinian flag – in a gesture of reversed colonisation – on the moon. Even though Sansour declares the unpopulated moon fit for settlement for the Palestinian people, the planet remains uninhabitable. In *Nation Estate*, she explains, “checkpoints are eliminated in the *Nation Estate* building. With each floor dedicated to a particular town, all intercity travel is made by elevator.” The residents of the *Nation Estate* complex, which is de facto a co-modified miniature version of Palestine, can only “enjoy” Jerusalem when peering outside the windows of their luxury condos, past the barbed wire and the watchtowers, at a distance deemed safe according to the occupying forces. *The Nation Estate* remains a site in transit, an ersatz for a real home, a real state.

These works are presented entertainingly, with engaging electro-oriental soundtracks, funky futurist costumes and nods to respectively inflated real estate development lingo and Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, but the aftertaste remains purposefully unsettling and open-ended. Even if the future seems bleak, Sansour always leaves room for things to turn a different way. Her next voyage is the development of a fair trade clothing line inspired by Palestinian embroidery. She hopes this will “sneak politics in through the back door. The final products are contemporary reinventions of the original traditions, re-spun versions of the same thread.” The way she describes this sounds very similar to her art: a means of preserving Palestinian heritage and insisting on the creation of a narrative of Palestine, albeit with a twist. 🇵🇸

For more information visit www.larissasansour.com, www.sabrinaamrani.com and www.lawrieshabibi.com