

***The Willful Plot* Online Artist Talk with Dana Qaddah**

Artist Talk Transcript

Dana Qaddah

My name is Dana Qaddah. I'm currently based on unceded, Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh territories, otherwise known as Vancouver.

Sidani Roof is a panoramic work comprised of a series of 25 photographs divided into three sets, each of which is dedicated to an edge of a rooftop garden located in Lebanon's capital of Beirut.

The first set, facing west, engages with the external environment by presenting a narrow view of the Mediterranean Sea. The north set, you catch a glimpse of a solar panel and infrastructural elements of the building that the garden is located in. At the end of the panorama, a poem is hung that was written in response to the work.

The rooftop garden was cared for by a lady who lived on the ninth floor of the building, which I lived in between 2010 and 2014. She's from the south of Lebanon, like my great-grandmother, a region spread with farms located by shorelines and on the mountainside as opposed to the rest of the coast. This being said, she had a green thumb.

She created the space on the rooftop of the densely urban city of Beirut, whose population has forgotten their familial roots and growing in such fertile land as Lebanon. Locating a garden in Beirut is like finding an oasis. Oftentimes, they're nestled in alleyways between buildings that are clear materializations of the architectural decay Lebanon has faced in the face of Civil War, municipal neglect, private ownership, and more recently chemical disaster.

During my teenage years, we occupied this space out of the need to be somewhere and exist with each other, away from the public, but also open air where we could do the mischievous things that teenagers did. I parallel our obsession with rooftops to our habit in earlier years of occupying sidewalks in front of stores after business hours. The only difference is that on rooftops, we were above the city rather than within and below it. In hindsight, I realized that the reason those areas were so appealing was because of the lack of public space offered by the city, and any that did exist weren't safe spaces for us because of different class and political divisions and the social tensions built into the city's fabric.

Unlike all other rooftops we occupied, *Sidani Roof* had an element of care to it that was only made legible by her commitment to growth. She cultivated from seed, and the photographs show by example how palm trees grown in pots have limits to their growth. Roots, cracking paint buckets, and numbers of new cacti growing from the depleted ones. I see a lot of symbolic parallels between those gestures, where we also felt like

our growth was limited in this landscape, the reason why the population of Lebanese people in diaspora is threefold to its local population.

In relation to this exhibition, I see this rooftop garden as an amalgamation of intersecting thematic divers, synonymous of only a few of the larger conditions which citizens and denizens of Lebanon are subjected to. Here we have a city which presented us with the many tensions of occupying public space. I think of this in relation to the anthropology of architecture, and how different urban environments dictate our engagements and abilities to culturally and socially relate as humans. Besides the political dimension of Lebanon's neighborhood division, where each is represented by a different religiously tied political faction, we can consider the economic lens to it. The displacement of people from their agricultural roots into heavily urbanized spaces in search for opportunities. There's also the personal and intimate tension of domestic hardship, as the garden was a respite for a woman subjected to the many trials and tribulations that women face in this country: by patriarchal laws, domestic abuse, and very little agency, depending on your religious background and who you're partnered with.

Locating the work in the show, next to the context of Rehab's work on Israeli eco colonial erasure of Palestinian villages by building national parks, *Sidani Roof* is speaking to the context of Lebanon being occupied by its own people. Selfish, neoliberal, private expansion has created this barrier for us to relate to our land in non extractive ways.

Since the uprising in 2019, COVID and the aftermath of the Port explosion in 2020, there's been a revival of independent non-governmental attempt to rehabilitate green spaces in Beirut: alongside riverbank and within unused inner-city plots, housed against the backdrop of an empty or abandoned land being turned into parking lots, makeshift dumps, or stuck in the stalemate of landowner neglect.

Because of the several crises Lebanon has undergone in the last decade, citizens and denizens have began growing their own products locally, recultivating their family farms and promoting others to do the same. There's a reason this region was called the Fertile Crescent, and you can grow anything here. And that abundance is evident by the variety of fruits and vegetables, which line the markets and the photographs, which you see.

My practice has always been invested in exploring all the discursive stems which could grow from the consideration of place, image, or object, just like I've outlined with *Sidani Roof*. In a more sentimental way, I've developed a language to try to communicate with parts of myself that I couldn't inherit but had to stumble upon out of necessity. Like the idea of cultivation, which ties me to my great-grandparents, who are the last of my nuclear lineage to live and work with the land where our roots are in Palestine and Syria.

The *Sidani Roof* was my first experience of consciously watching this being grown for use. She used to grow grapes, chilies, pomegranates. It was the first experience of witnessing plants go through their cycles of growth and decay. Paying attention to the energy it takes to cultivate one piece of pomegranate, for example. That pomegranate becomes a concentration of so much physical and emotional energy. This experience also became a bitter realization of the limitation of outcome in that context. Plants need space to grow in fruit, and in hindsight, I can parallel that with our perspective of our own potential.

My decision to include the text was an attempt to give the work a bit of context. It's hung on the wall at the end of the panorama, or beginning, depending on where you're entering the work from. It's divided into two columns, each with their own creative approach:

The left column does a good job at doing a more investigative study into the photographs. They are native to so many parts of the world. And when researching the symbolic interpretations of those plants, I found similarities, which I could thread into the story of the roof, described by the poem on the right side of the page.

The secondary poem locates the garden within the context of the city, as well as the more private perspective. While describing a narrow framing of horizon, the dense city air, details of the garden itself, as well as our relationship to the lady. I grew similarities between us and the growth that was happening in that garden, we became like the plants. Cared for, nestled in pots, waiting to break out and grow. Us being on that rooftop felt like this symbolic parallel. Up here, we were above the city and all the grief it gave us.

Lately, I've been thinking a lot about the potential of a seed, and how their potential for growth can be frozen until they become transported and introduced back into the cycle of life. These seeds came from all over the world to grow here. They could never leave like we did, but their steadfast commitment to growth has kept this garden alive for decades. I'm in Beirut now and it's springtime; and I've decided I would only visit during these months, where I feel like the land can be satiated by the rain.

We walk on the streets and trees harboring fruits like oranges and almonds surround us. How droplets glide off the layers of stone rubble and asphalt, and seep through the soil wherever something is planted.