

***The Willful Plot* Online Artist Talk with Rehab Nazzal**

Artist Talk Transcript

Rehab Nazzal

My name is Rehab Nazzal. I am speaking from the unceded Indigenous territories of Kanien'kehá:ka on the city of Tiohtià:ke known as Montreal.

We, the Wild Plants and Fruit Trees, from its title you can tell that there is an agency to the plants. I am intentionally giving agency to the plant. But the exhibition itself consists of about 60 photographs that range from two-by-two inches into 30 by 24 inches and exhibited organically, intentionally because plants grow in the land organically; they're not measured. Along with the video, *Canada Park*. *Canada Park* is connected to these images because both were recorded on Palestinian sites that were colonized. *Canada Park*, the land of where it stands, it was colonized in 1967, which is according to international law, this is illegally occupied territories.

In the second day of the occupation, Israel attacked. Israeli forces attacked three villages of Imwas, Yalo, and Bayt Nuba, and forced the residents to evacuate their homes. 10,000 residents of the three villages on foot, they walked to Ramallah, they walked to the neighboring country, Jordan. And immediately they build the homes. And there are testimonies included, even by one of the soldiers included in the video about the demolishing of the homes. And there were people, elderly and disabled who, their homes were demolished over their heads. They died under the rubble.

I discovered Canada Park in 2009. When I visited home. I was struck by the name of the park, Canada Park, and I'm coming from Canada. I managed to reach the site which is at the outskirts of Jerusalem. It is painful. It's an extremely painful experience, because as a Palestinian I recognize the plants, I recognize that this site was a backyard. This is a front yard. This is a demarcation between home, and home. I recognize stairs left of some homes, the stones as well of the homes. Which is the irony, some of the stones were taken, and on these stones, plaques of Canadian donors who donated money to establish a recreational park exclusive for Israelis. Palestinians cannot reach that park.

I mean, I really photographed that year. I took photographs, while walking throughout the site. When I reached Ramallah, there was a friend of my family who I dropped at his work at the office just to have a coffee and have rest and just express my rage. And he looked at me, and he said "I am from Imwas, and I was a child when the expulsion happened." With a small camera with me, video camera, I recorded his testimony. And I decided to go next year and make a long documentary, which might include further people. Then when I went later, a couple of years later, he had cancer, and he was in terrible state. Two more years he died. I made this video, while he is in my mind, and try to include as much archival material as possible along with still photographs. So this is the video, *Canada Park*.

Now the village of Lifta at the outskirts of Jerusalem, as well, Lifta was depopulated in 1948 Nakba, when two thirds of the Palestinian population were expelled, uprooted from their homes and lands to become the largest refugee issue in our modern time. The village, of course, over 500 villages, the Zionist militia at the time, they depopulated and demolished. Three of the villages they did not demolish, one of them Ein Hod around Haifa, which is turned into artist colony. Where artists do residency, the non-Palestinians of course, it's exclusive as well for foreign citizens, foreign artists and Israelis. At Ein Hod the Mosque of the village is a bar and restaurant. The horse stable was turned into gallery. I did visit that village and I'm intending to do some work later on. But Lifta, so three villages Ein Hod, Lifta, and another village I can't recall the name now. These three villages were not demolished. The other village is now inhabited by Israelis. Beautiful village. And Lifta was not inhabited. The houses, the beautiful houses, most of them, the roof of the houses were - like how do you call it - they made a hole, the militia, in the roof of almost every house to prevent the Palestinians from returning.

The village, it was one of the richest villages in Palestine. And it has a large, vast land. And also, it has a spring water source. I visited that village three times. And in 2016, when I organized a conference, that was at Dar al-Kalima University in Bethlehem, I actually organized a trip to the participants of the conference to that village. And, it really was difficult for everyone. Difficult to comprehend, like these houses left just deteriorating, and the owners of these houses who build them, we used to live in them. They are, some of them, a kilometers or two away in the West Bank in East Jerusalem, and they're prevented from returning.

Now to also connect to during the pandemic. I was in Palestine when it broke, the Coronavirus COVID-19, I was in Ramallah. And my flight was canceled. And the borders were sealed for several months. And I was alone in Ramallah, even I wasn't with my family, but I was able to move in nature. So, I spent several months alone with nature without anyone. And the most amazing experience I had in my life. Like to get as close as possible to those plants, to the flowers to the insects to the tree. Even the sound, the sound of nature. The sound of trees, the olive trees, and those small insects. It was amazing. And I used all my equipment to record many videos, photographs. But I was I was really struck by the flowers, the wild flowers. And as you know, as you know, in the art world, beauty, the concept of beauty the concept of flowers is disregarded usually.

And yes, I obtained my education here. And I remember in every institution, there is always something about the beauty of nature. There's something misunderstood, misinterpreted, ignored. Which made me think further, and further about this tendency in the academic world with colonization. Because, like, we'll talk now about Indigeneity, and Decolonization. And in my belief as a Palestinian, Indigeneity, it's, it's that relationship of people with the land. If you break it, you break Indigeneity, people. So to get to have to Indigenized the country even here, it means the land back and restoring the relation that's being targeted.

We in the mainstream art institutions in the academic world, we sometimes, consciously or not, we serve a tendency of colonization, settler colonialism. I'll go back to the photographs I took, which so many, like thousands and thousands of photographs. Of course, we need a context to

present anything we do to do with the land, the destruction of the land, the colonisation in the West Bank, where bulldozers are wiping out land to build settlements, illegal settlements in the West Bank. I need to juxtapose those in a way that doesn't erase the critical aspect of the work at the same time. Like not to simplify the work itself. And that's how the exhibition came about.

The plants, the resisting, the same as the human resistance. I fear of course, for how long they will resist, because the destructive power that human has. The military destruction, the extraction of resources, it does affect the plants, but the resistance within this plant, the persistence to continue, you could see it so strongly in these depopulated and destroyed Palestinian villages, including Lifta. Like the image of a seed, from almond tree, in the cracks of one of the homes, becomes a tree and it's giving more almonds. The sage, the akoub, all of these plants, they're still persistent and of course, the cactus is the queen of all these plants. These plants have a will, a strong will of continuing, persisting, fighting. They are fighting through these seeds, the roots. It's I think it's something that we humans can learn from a lot.