HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

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JUMANA MANNA

SUSTAINING RESILIENCE

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Installation view of "Thirty Plumbers in the Belly" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), 2021. Courtesy M HKA.

It's a situation that sounds farcical until it quickly becomes clear how real it is: Jumana Manna's new film *Foragers* (2022) dramatizes the perennial struggles of Palestinians gathering the wild herb za'atar, the artichoke-like *akkoub* (gundelia), and other native species. Under Israeli laws, the foraging of these plants—including za'atar, *akkoub*, and sage, which are central to Palestinian cuisine—is illegal, as they were categorized as endangered species. To this day, the foragers, some of whom are elderly or low-income Palestinians, as Manna depicts in the film, are chased by the police and issued fines or even arrested, intensifying the ongoing struggle and pain of Palestinian communities dispossessed from their land during the 1948 Nakba and in the decades since.

Foragers builds on many of the topics—such as food security, sustainable agriculture in the era of climate change, and state conflict—that Manna explored in her previous documentary-based film, *Wild Relatives* (2018). In that film, Manna traces the relocation of an agricultural research center from Aleppo to the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon amid the uprising in Syria, and then the duplication of seeds for long-term storage at the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, located on a remote island under Norwegian custody in the Arctic.

Shortly after Manna debuted *Foragers* at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, we spoke in January about her approach to creating the hyperreal atmosphere of the film by merging documentary and staged footage featuring a mixture of actors and non-actors reenacting their actual experiences. Looking beyond the real-world topics of *Foragers*, Manna connects her filmmaking to the interests of her sculptural works at her 2021 exhibition, "Thirty Plumbers in the Belly," at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), through a sensorial approach that explores the materiality of sound and image, and the aurality and visuality of physical materials, as well as the potential of affective histories and the contradictions of preservation practices.

I was immediately struck by how cinematic the chase scenes are at the beginning of *Foragers*, even though they are rooted in real situations where Palestinians have to avoid Israeli nature patrols and border guards. How did you think through playing with an audience's expectations of artifice and realism in the film?

After finishing *Wild Relatives*, I felt the need to break out of realism and move in the direction of work that is more fictional, and speculative, to start thinking about the potential of sci-fi or the hyperreal. Specifically with *Foragers*, the tragic-comic aspect of these chases between the nature patrol and the Palestinians who are out foraging, the absurdity, as well as the abundance and magic of the landscape coming to life in the spring were central motivations for responding with a form that wasn't just documentary.

This film started with two anecdotes or scenes. My aunts, who are in their 70s and 80s: they still go out picking *akkoub* really early in the morning before the patrol wakes up to avoid being caught. When I came to understand this—and it was relatively recently, even though I've been eating this food all my life—I had the realization that my elderly aunts are considered law offenders, scofflaws! It's hilarious and brutal. I started asking for more details about their adventures and imagining this high-tech policing apparatus chasing grandmas with baskets. The second starting point was joining my parents' regular foraging trips to the village of Suba, a depopulated village in the Jerusalem mountains. They collect a plethora of wild herbs in the spring, as a pensioner pastime, "healthy food" obsession, and, almost accidentally, a deeply political act of performing continuity in a destroyed Palestinian village.

In my previous two films *Wild Relatives* and *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* (2016), I scripted for non-actors, working with characters to basically restage their everyday life, in a formally more controlled approach than direct documentary work. With *Foragers*, I went a step further, taking more liberties with the writing and staging of reality. Many things that I wanted to show are not possible to film without engaging with the colonial legal apparatus that I did not want to collaborate with. So it became clear that the confrontation with the law should be staged. Since much of the theater of law is about the art of lying, it felt fitting to erase this distinction between truth and fabulation, or old-school divisions of documentary and fiction, in order to tell the story as I wanted to tell it.

Foragers, 2022, stills from HD video: 65 min. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

Wild Relatives, 2018, stills from HD video: 64 min. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.

How important are the locations in the film?

The film is shot primarily in the Upper Galilee and the Golan Heights, and partly in Jerusalem. The locations are important, as they are sites of demolished villages, amongst them my maternal grandparents' village, Qaditha, in the area of Safad, from which they were expelled in 1948, the houses razed, land stolen and recategorized as "state land." This is a familiar case for a big part of what is now called Israel and where these nature-protection laws are enforced. So Samir's defiant response in court [he is one of the Palestinians who is fined for foraging] summarizes the general sentiment: "This law is shit. To hell with you and your law."

The violence recorded in this landscape is something I've inherited and am conscious of whenever I am in it. It's this double gaze of beauty and horror that I try to capture in the camera language, particularly when filming nature and the act of foraging in the ruins. Meaning, both pain and love, care and life continue to grow out of these ruins.

Is it a problem for you if someone who doesn't know as much about the history and conditions of Palestine were to watch the film and wonder if this is a satire?

In a sense it is a satire—I mean, the whole situation is satirical! I don't consider myself a documentary filmmaker in the traditional sense of what documentary is supposed to do: and that's to inform, educate, or provoke anger toward a particular topic—to move people into action. Usually the action stops with watching the film and feeling good about feeling bad. The idea that if you educate audiences they will respond to injustice is not very effective, and Palestine is an excellent example of that frustration.

But I am interested in contradictions, empathy, and sensuality. The overall story is reflective of the reality, so how much is staged, is satire or real, is secondary to the textures of sound, image, and emotion that I am dedicated to. I feel fine with confusing viewers, if that confusion is around fact or fiction, as those who care to know more will do the research. Someone who was writing about the film recently wrote to me, saying, "I just want to get my facts straight so I'm not just accused by the Germans that, there they are again, the Palestinians making up stories again." But we know whether it's fact or fiction, Palestinian narratives are dismissed by those who gain from dismissing us.

There's a lot of excellent work out there that unpacks the ideologies of "greenwashing" all over the world. We know that what happens to the land happens to the people. What happens to people also happens to their narratives. The war of narratives is a major site of struggle. And creating satire or fiction is part of the power and territory of the imaginary.

What was it like to restage some of these scenes that derive from stories you heard from people—was it traumatic or cathartic for them to restage these encounters?

This cast is a mix of professional actors who have not necessarily lived the details of these events and non-actors who have. But also the casting of the actors was based on how relatable the events or positions were to their emotional lives. I think the court hearings were particularly cathartic, as half of the characters more or less restaged their own experiences, frustrations, and rage for the camera. They could relive this moment without fear and say things they couldn't necessarily say to a judge. They had more freedom to express themselves in fiction. It was also important for me that the interrogators are Israeli—characters who carry or perform that body language of entitlement, the nuances of language, and the accent and argumentation that I trusted would provoke the most genuine emotions on set.

Nevertheless, the dialogue is very clean, and the cast's rage, or mocking compliance, is so well articulated. How did you coax that from them?

The court hearings, interrogations, and police investigations are based on court summaries that are in the public domain, and Rabea Eghbarieh, who co-scripted the interrogations with me, has actually defended some of these cases in court. The court summaries are very brief. They mention what the person was accused of, what their defense was, and what they got indicted for, or what the fine was. They're fascinating to read because even with that brevity they reveal how people deal with these situations in a whole array of ways. I admire how creative they become in these situations, when clearly they're lying but they don't want to give the court any legitimacy.

I was interested in how foraging becomes a metaphor but it's also an activity that is depicted in a very realistic way—it can be an act of defiance against the state, while being connected with ideas of sustaining oneself as well as the ecologically sound maintenance of the land. It also makes you think we should all learn about foraging, in whatever context we live. How do you think about foraging in a future-oriented way?

My parents, who are like the elderly couple in the film, forage everything, both the banned *akkoub* and za'atar alongside dozens of other wild herbs. I wanted to capture that joy and sense of plentitude of that comes from foraging: the depth of knowledge, the beauty of being able to recognize all of these similar-looking but different plants. In some cases, these are plants that are only edible at certain moments—only before they flower, for instance—but then they become poisonous. There's so much tenderness and specificity that has been passed on—that excites me, that is what I wanted to be central in the film. The encounter with the law is of course crucial, not least as a comedic element, and a nuisance of sorts that tries but fails to prevent the continuation of this tradition.

After finishing *Wild Relatives*, I thought again about what a sustainable agriculture that still feeds the world can look like. Foraging is one response—because so much food grows on its own, without inputs, chemical or otherwise, and without depleting the land. It's a survival tool that's ancient but continues to be relevant for the future, especially if you don't have money but also if there's a shortage of cultivatable land. It too needs to be done responsibly. Za'atar is indeed harder to find, like many things wild. So what do we do with the fact that so many plants have gone and continue to go extinct? In some European countries, you're not allowed to pick certain berries anymore, for example. Red-listing plants and nature-protection laws are obviously not specific to Israel—but it's the grounds on which these laws are passed. The future question is how to encourage the dissemination of plant-related knowledge and practices that allow both plants and humans to live in dignity. I think this is what some have called a planetary democracy.

How did you become interested in agriculture?

Along with growing up in a home full of plants, it grew out of my interest in archives. My earlier work is about archival documents like photographs and records. In my research around pre-1948 Jerusalem for *A Magical Substance* and *A Sketch of Manners* (2013), I started coming across photos, postcards, and paraphernalia with all kinds of plant themes. I was really taken by some of these images because they were extremely beautiful, including these hand-colored photographs of poppy fields and stunning landscapes from Palestine—and they're sitting in colonial archives. They document that moment but are also part of the erasure and colonization that laid the groundwork for the establishment of the state of Israel. I had a paradoxical feeling that I was looking at such incredibly beautiful things that I wanted to spend time with but that are also documents of violence.

From this research, I also came across herbarium sheets in some of these archives and I became interested in herbariums. I did a project, *Post-Herbarium* (2016), about the missionary and botanist George Post, whose archive is at the American University of Beirut, and who attempted the first comprehensive herbarium of Syria, Palestine, and Sinai. So, my starting points were archives and taxonomies, and how they are foundational to colonial power structures, notions of ownership, and racialization as well.

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Installation view of "Thirty Plumbers in the Belly" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), 2021. Courtesy M HKA.

Installation view of *S Pipe,* 2021, ceramics, 43 cm × 63 cm × 23 cm, at "Thirty Plumbers in the Belly," Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA), 2021. Courtesy M HKA.

There's a scene in *Foragers* when a woman is gathering plants underneath a settler's overpass that exemplifies how bodies are forced into uncomfortable relationships to a piece of architecture that is the physical manifestation of an oppressive state. Your sculptures in "Thirty Plumbers in the Belly" revolved around the forms of drainage pipes and also plastic bags with old, molding flat breads. I'm interested in how different your two practices look—are they connected through your interest in things that are unseen or overlooked?

Sure, that's one of the ways. Maybe in sculpture, foraging is more of a metaphor, similar to "gleaning," or looking at the overlooked. I like to collect images and materials as part of the process of making sculptures, and I'm also interested in Ann Laura Stoler's conceptualization of ruination that is an active process, a conditioning act, that focuses on structures of vulnerability, damage, and refusal sustained by imperial formations. Much of my recent work is on the tension between preservation and ruination, or the paradoxes of institutionalized preservation practices that erase as they conserve, while believing in the necessity of preservation as a mode of taking care of life. But, again, also how these practices get embedded in power relations. I keep returning to the tension between attempts at stopping decay and the unruly potential of ruins and decay as a part of life.

In the text that I wrote for my show at M HKA, "Thirty Plumbers in the Belly," I tried to say something about this body of work being about improvisation and the unruly potential of ruination amid infrastructural collapse. There's a necessary potentiality in that void or in that state of vulnerability where things have to be rebuilt, regrown, or reassembled in another way. Mutation is also a part of that, like how bodies and places morph as a response to all kinds of pressures and the violence that are put on them. In Palestine, Lebanon, and many places in the world, there is a permanent and calculated infrastructural breakdown. It's there as a way to keep people oppressed—things look weird, the architecture looks weird or ugly, and people behave in strange ways; there are a lot of toxic relations. But there are also alternative structures of care, and weird expressions of love, and communities holding things together. So as a general spirit or attitude, that's what I'm doing in both my film and sculptural practices, but of course the mediums have their own processes—they do different things, and they look very different.

It's taken time for me to realize what I want to do in both mediums. When I finished my graduate degree, I put so much pressure on the idea that sculpture can't have a critical capacity because in the end it's just a commodity. I kept trying to figure out ways to make sculpture embody the kind of gesture or action that could be seen as an act of critique or defiance. But over time, I've realized mediums just do different things. And, sure, we can question how much sculpture can function as a critical tool when it lives primarily in institutions and economies that are corrupt at their core—to greater or lesser degrees, of course. But I also believe in the power of materials and space, in the symbolic value of sculptural presence. That relates to what I was saying earlier on images, narratives, and storytelling. Most importantly, I get a lot of pleasure and grounding in the making of things. Drawing and sculpture have an immediacy and even therapeutic power that is hard to reproduce with film because with that there is so much planning and waiting.

There's a moment in *Wild Relatives* when a priest and a scientist are together in Svalbard overlooking the town of Longyearbyen, and they are discussing their expectations for a future with climate change. The priest says he "believes in humans." In thinking about *Foragers*, I find a sense of resilience and survival, but the story is also tragic. In doing these different projects, do you also find reasons to "believe in humans" or more reasons to be pessimistic about our future?

I think only a Norwegian priest could say that he believes in humans! I believe in struggle and love—that's what constitutes life. And no more so today than any time in the past. It's always been about struggle. It's the history of racial capitalism, or modernity, to define who is welcome or excluded in that category of human or "man." So I don't even know how to answer that question. I don't want to say no, because we're alive and we are a reality. But what I think the priest is saying in that sentence is that he believes in humans to do good. I'm not sure I share that sentiment. What I hope that *Foragers* portrays is that there is resilience and a dignified life, even in this deeply violent occupation. That's what Palestinians are asking for, but that's also what they're enacting in the existence of daily life.

Foragers, 2022, still from HD video: 65 min. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London.