ARTFORUM

FILM

SEEDS OF CHANGE

April 30, 2018 • Kaelen Wilson-Goldie on Jumana Manna's *Wild Relatives* (2017)

Jumana Manna, *Wild Relatives*, 2018, HD video, color, sound, 66 minutes.

ONE DOESN'T NEED to go far to find a meaningful connection between art and serious farming, especially when the art in question is driven by political urgency. The example of John Berger, the poet, critic, and painter who lived half his life on a remote working farm in rural France, is close enough. For the past ten years, the Palestinian artist Jumana Manna has been making dazzling films and quizzical objects about the historical strata and lived experience of cities, namely Jerusalem. Her works draw upon many sources and experiment with many genres, but virtually all of them are urban—with the possible exception of the works she has made about Norway, its various mythologies, and its reputation in the modern world as a doer of good. More recently, these particular works—and the questions they raise about moral authority and realpolitik—have led her out of the city and into the dirt, muck, and magic of vast tracts of farmland.

Manna's latest film, *Wild Relatives* (2018), takes her long-term study of Norwegian benevolence and turns it into a curious triangle, bypassing the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, which the Oslo Accords never really solved anyway, and considers instead Norway's relationship to Lebanon and Syria. The link between them is the so-called Doomsday Vault, a giant seed bank chipped into a mountain range on the coal-mining island of Svalbard. Officially known as the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, the facility holds backup copies of the world's biodiversity, just in case one of the thousands of smaller gene banks scattered across the planet are ever destroyed by a natural disaster, a man-made catastrophe, or the apocalypse.

As it happens, access to one such gene bank, located outside Aleppo, was cut off in 2015, after the initially hopeful uprising in Syria collapsed into a gruesomely complicated civil war. The development organization that ran the Aleppo gene bank, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, or ICARDA, made for one of the few feel-good news stories of the Syrian war, when it appealed to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault to take back the seeds it has stored there, replant them, cultivate the crops, and re-create the imperiled gene bank in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, with the idea of then bringing the same seeds back to Svalbard to store once again. The subtle, slow-burning intelligence of Manna's film lies in the way she gently holds up the best of these intentions against quiet but forceful evidence that suggests baser motives and more troubling consequences.

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Politically speaking, Manna gives us glimpses into the work of the Svalbard vault, the relocated ICARDA center, and several different groups of farmers—including a crew of young, frightfully precarious female day laborers who are also refugees—working on industrial, organic, and subsistence levels. Her voice-over narration offers a few discursive touchstones: The dictator Hafez al-Assad began organizing Syria's ancient peasant farming system as a way of bringing rural populations under tighter control, and the proliferation of gene banks was part of the so-called Green Revolution, which was itself part of the Cold War (it was thought that increased agricultural production would be an effective weapon against Communism).

But Manna steps back from delivering an indictment. She is barely present in the film, appearing once as a passing shadow, when a wizened old farmer teases her for stepping on a cucumber and she squeals before ducking out of the way. She lets a number of questions and implications linger like pauses on-screen: Are gene banks actually doing more harm than good and eliminating crop diversity? How triumphant is the Svalbard seed transfer, really, in the light of a war that has continued for so long, killing half a million people, with eleven million more displaced, and untold numbers destitute? What does it mean—what will it mean—if what one of the farmers in Lebanon says is true, that landowners in the Bekaa Valley are now earning better money by building refugee camps than they are by cultivating their crops? How thin is the line between the do-good gesture, the feel-good story, and war profiteering?

Manna doesn't answer any of these questions, but then again, she doesn't really have to. She strikes gold in the last of her subjects, a self-styled organic farmer named Walid al-Youssef, who has been living in Lebanon as a refugee for seven years. Charismatic and eccentric, he isn't interested in the techniques of industrial agriculture. He wants the grain, the texture, and the knowledge of heirloom seeds and actual farmers' tricks like spiking the water with nettle leaf to keep his crops healthy. He has his own small network of seed collection and exchange, among friends and relatives who have planted and harvested for generations. He speaks rapturously of earthworms. He folds back layers of soil to show them to Manna, adding warmly: "Big ambitions, Jumana. This is the richest compost in the world. This one right here. It cannot be valued in money." But it can be measured in hope.

— *Kaelen Wilson-Goldie*