

ARTFORUM

INTERVIEWS

JUMANA MANNA

September 18, 2015 • Jumana Manna speaks about her latest feature-length film



Jumana Manna, *A magical substance flows into me*, 2015, digital video, color, sound, 1 hour 10 minutes.

Jumana Manna is a Berlin- and Jerusalem-based artist whose work revolves around the body, national identity, and historical narratives. Her latest film, A magical substance flows into me, will be on view at [Chisenhale Gallery](#) in London as part of her first UK solo exhibition, which opens on September 18, 2015. Here, the artist speaks about her research into the career of Robert Lachmann, whose work as a musicologist served as an inspiration for her film and an impetus for her to delve into the musical traditions of the different ethnic groups of Palestine.

ROBERT LACHMANN was a German-Jewish ethnomusicologist. He moved from Berlin to Jerusalem in 1935 to establish a department of Oriental music at the Hebrew University. Judah Magnes, the first president of the university, invited Lachmann after he was dismissed from his position as a music librarian at the Berlin National Library following the Nazis' rise to power. I first came across his story in the memoirs of Palestinian oud player Wasif Jawhariyyeh while doing research on the urban social life in Jerusalem before the Nakba—the exodus of Palestinians from their homes during the war of 1948. Jawhariyyeh wrote about his encounter

HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

with a certain Dr. Lachmann, whom he would meet to record and discuss Oriental music. He recounts an argument they had on one occasion about the future of Arabic music and the question of notation; Lachmann was against Arabic music's adopting Western systems of notation. He thought Arabic music was too "emotional" and also that it would be difficult to notate because of the quarter-tone system. Lachmann wanted Arabic music to remain pure and free from Western influence. Jawhariyyeh was of the opposite opinion: He thought that the only way to preserve tradition was to write it down and that notation could be a tool for progress. For me, this disagreement encapsulated the dilemmas of modernity, and the bifurcated relationship of Palestine to the West.

Lachmann realized that from a scholarly perspective, the distinction between Arab and Jew, which was already ubiquitous in Jerusalem at that time, was false and detrimental to the study of Oriental music. His refusal to recognize this divide made it difficult for him to raise funds for his research. He proposed a radio program to the Palestine Broadcasting Service called "Oriental Music," hoping to challenge this divide and to educate listeners, especially European listeners, about the diversity within Palestine and the importance of cross-cultural study. My film is based on this program, which was a failure in certain ways. I aim to question why it failed, and I ask what the stakes of such a project might be in the present. I made a conscious decision not to invite all the groups of people to one studio, as Lachmann did, but instead to visit them in their respective towns, villages, and cities. Although there is a kind of potentiality within the film, I'm also addressing the segregation of Israel and Palestine and the impossibility of reconstituting the space of Mandate Palestine in the present day. It does not idealize this time and the Mandate, but rather helps provide a space from which another Palestine can be imagined.

Since the home is the heart of any colonial struggle, I decided to shoot the film in people's homes. It's partly coincidental that a lot of conversations take place in the kitchen, but I also see an echo between the craft of music and the making of food, a kind of corporeal memory. The film is very much about proximity, the limitations of language, the limitations of these encounters, and a certain violence. But it is also about desiring, and seeking to constitute something anew.

— *As told to Lara Atallah*