BOMB

Wild Relatives: Jumana Manna Interviewed by Hakim Bishara

Tracing the history of a region through its seeds.

Jumana Manna. *Wild Relatives,* 2018. Film still. Photograph by Marte Vold. Courtesy of the artist.

Jumana Manna's work shifts between sculpture and film, body and land, narrative and form. The Berlin-based Palestinian artist's archive-stirring and essayic films meditate on forgotten histories relating to her country of origin, often combined with a personal narrative. Her latest film, *Wild Relatives* (2018), is the first to look at a subject outside Palestine, although it doesn't look too far. The film tells the story of a lost seed bank in Aleppo, Syria, one of several gene banks around the world that were created to preserve seeds for posterity in the aim of protecting biodiversity from the extinction caused by climate change catastrophes, disease, or wars. Originally located in Lebanon, the seed bank was moved to the Aleppo area in 1976 because of the Lebanese Civil War, which started a year earlier

and lasted until 1990. In a tragic reversal of history, the seed bank was returned to Lebanon after Syria's own civil war had ravaged Aleppo. However, the seeds never made it, thus leading to the first ever withdrawal of samples from the Global Seed Vault in Norway (also known as the "Doomsday Seed Vault") to be replanted and reproduced for the sake of preserving Aleppo's indigenous flora. Manna's film follows the movement of seeds between Syria, Lebanon, and Norway, as well as the stories of the refugees and farmers who were uprooted and exploited along the way.

—Hakim Bishara

Hakim Bishara
Your previous films focused on Palestine's lost urban culture by reviving and reenacting archival materials. *Wild Relatives* is completely different in its subject matter, geography, and method of work. What drew you to this story?

Jumana Manna
The extreme nature of the current reality is what made me want to respond to our contemporary moment without necessarily alluding to a historical blue print as I did before. But it is maybe not so different from previous work, in that a seed bank is an archive too. *Wild Relatives* developed in continuity with research that I had already been doing. I was looking through a lot of postcards with pressed flowers, herbarium sheets, early photography and illustrations of plants in various archives, but mainly in Jerusalem. I was drawn to the various aesthetics of these plant reproductions, be they for scientific, decorative, or symbolic reasons, but also how something so seemingly benign as flowers can carry the violence of colonialism. I produced an installation in 2016 titled *Post Herbarium* from an encounter with a nineteenth-century herbarium established by US missionary and botanist George E. Post (1838–1909). *Post Herbarium* explored the folding of landscapes into filing cabinets and the emergence of still life as an esteemed art historical genre alongside the rise of the discipline of botany.

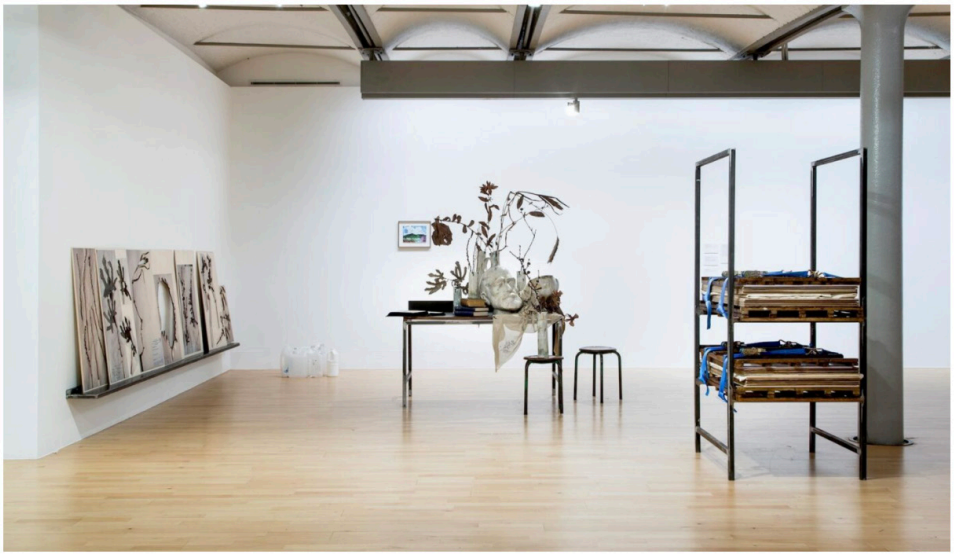
HB
How did *Post Herbarium* lead you to the Syrian uprising in Aleppo and the loss of its seed bank?

JM
Wild Relatives brought together two things I had been invested in: plant taxonomy and broader questions around land use on the one hand, and the uprising in Syria on the other. I tried to think of contemporary parallels

to these eighteenth- and nineteenth-century taxonomies, which organized plant life for purposes of both research and economic benefit. That is how I arrived at the seed banks, and more specifically the story of the International Center for Agriculture Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) abandoned bank in Aleppo. I thought of these seed banks as inheritors of the lineage of botanical gardens and herbariums that assisted the transfer of flora from the corners of the world to European centers, organizing the "disorder" of plants to fit big business. Both herbariums and seed banks have the effect of condensing life from an expansive shifting space into a compressed and frozen form. But, in looking at Syria, where the revolution came primarily from rural populations unable to sustain farming, and therefore life, there was this whole other level of politics at play in the centralization of seeds. From herbarium to seed bank to Syrian Revolution, it became about thinking of forms of soft versus hard power, between the centralization of seeds under the banner of rescue, and the centralized control over agrarian populations in Syria under the guise of modernizing the state.

HB

Seed banks seem like such a noble idea, but the film shows us a less benevolent side to them.



Jumana Manna. *Post Herbarium*, 2016. Installation view at Tate Liverpool, the Liverpool Biennale, UK. Photograph by Richard Ivey.

JM

Seed banks are there as a gene pool for production, as much as for preservation. Research centers operating these seed portals often distribute or produce seed varieties that are not the heirloom seeds they protect in their banks. They serve a model of profit based industrial agriculture. They are another manifestation of this classical modernist contradiction of the urge to preserve the very thing being erased, and this has been a red thread in much of my work.

Jumana Manna. *Wild Relatives,* 2018. Film still. Photograph by Marte Vold. Courtesy of the artist.

HB

In one of the scenes in the film, you cover a press conference at the Global Seed Vault in Norway when the seed samples are finally returned to the vault after being replicated. The Norwegian representative says, in the presence of the ICARDA delegates, "ideally, we have this [vault] as a security deposit for the world and we hope, to be frank, that it never needs to be used again. Because if things work around the world as they should, then we shouldn't need to take seeds out. But because of the situation in Aleppo, as we all know, it needed to be done." As someone who lived and studied in Norway, did you recognize a patronizing tone in her words, as I did?

JM

For sure. *The Goodness Regime* (2013), which I made in collaboration with Sille Storihle, was about the construction of Norway's benevolence—the apparatus that perpetuates the image of Norway as a peacemaking nation, absolving it from the power structures it upholds. The Global Seed Vault fits within this narrative and self-imaging. I found this press conference perverse and self-congratulatory. The comments are patronizing because they locate the problem in "those Arabs misbehaving again" or mismanaging their affairs, as opposed to being in a political crisis. Hers and others' comments depoliticize the war in Syria by calling it a "situation" or "instability," avoiding any mention of the dictatorship and compliance of imperial powers to the atrocities committed.

HB

You later extended the subject of the film to your sculptural work. In the 2018 exhibition *Cache* at Lafayette Anticipations in Paris, you presented clay sculptures inspired by the *khabya*—a traditional storage chamber in Middle Eastern homes, where grains were preserved for year-long consumption before the introduction of modern refrigeration—mounted on the industrial shelving of seed banks with piles of slag (a leftover matter from coal burning) scattered all around. Talk about the connection you make between these different materials.

Jumana Manna. *Storage*, 2016. Photograph by Richard Ivey.

JM

I had first seen these containers, or *khabyas*, in Palestine when I was working on another project with Riwaq—a center for the preservation of rural architectural heritage in the West Bank. I was stunned by them, and how incredibly beautiful they were, how they relate to the body and to the architecture in which they were built. But their function also embodied survival and continuity. *Khabyas* are obsolete today, crumbling away in abandoned village homes. After making *Wild Relatives* I went back to these villages, thinking of *khabyas* as a predecessor to gene banks. I wanted to store storages, so to speak, by propping them on metal shelves. The idea was to add more layers to this onion-like structure in which the stored seeds are already archives of the cultivation process that have existed for generations.

As for the slag, I decided to include it as I was thinking about spillages, or an attempt to contain the uncontainable. Coal has transformed our world, not least through agricultural production. Also, the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard is set inside a mountain that was formerly used for coal mining. Ultimately, one of the main reasons why seeds need to be preserved is due to the fossil fuel burning that's causing climate change and mass extinction, another great irony of capitalism.

Jumana Manna's *Wild Relatives* is on view at The Douglas Hide Gallery in Dublin, Ireland, until February 23.

Jumana Manna's *Wild Relatives* is on view in *Post-Nature—A Museum as an Ecosystem*, the 2018 Taipei Biennial at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, until March 10.