frieze

Jumana Manna: The Violence of Beautiful Things

From the musical traditions of Palestine to the global circulation of seeds, the artist unpicks the power structures that support even the most lyrical aspects of life

BY MEDIA FARZIN IN **FEATURES** | 18 AUG 18

'Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly,' Walter Benjamin complained in 1936. But times were dark, and even the literary-minded had little patienc for poetic ambiguity. The narrative form of the day was 'information' – strident argument, plenty of detail, no dot left unconnected. Benjamin worried about its staying power. A proper story, he musec is about holding something back, so that it 'preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time'. A well-crafted tale plays the long game: 'It resembles the seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day.'

Jumana Manna is a storyteller of the old school. This may seem surprising since, on paper, she fall within the camp of 'artist as researcher' – most often a cerebral combination of historian, ethnographer, documentary filmmaker and activist. The Berlin-based artist's films, sculptures and installations are often driven by archival analysis: she'll pluck a photograph, historic figure or even from the archive and re-animate its story with a rigorously critical eye. Having grown up as a Palestinian in Jerusalem, her politics are uncompromising and unsentimental, delivered with the formal restraint characteristic of a cosmopolitan art education (in her case, in Jerusalem, Oslo anc Los Angeles).

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But Manna's work is disarmingly easy to appreciate. There are no dense wall texts or abstract plotlines. Rather, her stories are thoughtfully timed and crisply narrated, laced with moments of unusually lyrical beauty. Her 2018 feature film, Wild Relatives, contains many such shots. In one, the camera frames Walid, a Syrian refugee farmer, with the gravitas of a Johannes Vermeer painting. The soft light picks out his table, with its jars and bags of seeds, and spotlights the clay bowl in his hands. The scene is barely a minute long, but it amplifies the importance of an individual, and his care for the land, within the film as a whole.

Wild Relatives is a story about plants – specifically, crops grown in the world's 'dry areas', those which are subject to study by the International Center of Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA). In 2012, the organization had to abandon its headquarters in war-torn Syria, leaving its seed bank behind. Once it had resettled in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, ICARDA sent for the back-ups that it had stored with the Global Seed Vault in Svalbard, an archipelago situated between Norway and the North Pole. Over 70 minutes, Manna's film follows the seeds' return to the vault after successful replanting and duplication. She then continues to spend time with the landscape and its inhabitants, having moved from the fertile valley to the windswept Arctic over the course of 12 months.

Wild Relatives is really a story about people and their relation to the land. We spend time with the young Syrian refugees (all women) who tend to ICARDA's crops, pollinating entire fields by hand with tweezers. We also meet Youssef, a Lebanese farmer and occasional ICARDA driver who leases his fields to Syrian refugees as campgrounds, and Walid, a displaced farmer whose small seed collection – of local heritage varieties that he trades with fellow farmers – gives the film an almost upbeat ending. Here, Wild Relatives builds an implicit contrast between the frozen time of the vault, with its capitalist associations of accumulation and institutional power, and the hopeful energy around Walid's seed library, in many ways its open-access alternative.

Jumana Manna, Cache (Insurance Policy), 2018, installation view, Lafayette Anticipations, Paris. Courtesy: the artist and Lafayette Anticipations, Paris; photograph: Pierre Antoine

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Beyond Manna's bare-bones narration, Wild Relatives features little dialogue, although there is the occasionally scripted moment, as when the Svalbard priest laboriously climbs onto wooden scaffolding to chat with a climate scientist. Instead, Manna prioritizes extended shots of panoramic landscapes and everyday objects, fragments of conversations and radio hum. But, despite the poetic framing and slow pacing, the film maintains a rigorous, questioning approach. What are the networks of power governing the global movement of seeds? What is the impact of ICARDA's work on the lives of farmers in places like the Bekaa Valley? Whose interests are ultimately served by this kind of research – and how? Manna offers answers to these questions but she does so with a critique that is gentle and highly attuned to the complexity at hand.

Manna's Cache (Insurance Policy) (2018) builds on many of the themes introduced by Wild Relatives. The installation, part of a suite of related works on view this autumn at the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter in Oslo, comprises a group of hollow cubic structures made of clay. These are Manna's sculptural take on the khabya: an ancestor of the refrigerator that was once used across the Levant to keep farmers' harvested grains – as well as liquids like oil and wine – cool and viable. Manna has given the cubes a weirdly anthropomorphic appeal, with squat, uneven bodies and the occasional set of little legs. Their organic shapes contrast with the industrial racks that they perch on, which echo those employed at seed banks.

Next to the cubes are piles of coal slag, which were dredged from the underground mines of Svalbard. As Manna has pointed out: 'It's ironic that the same mountain where coal was being extracted – coal being one of the main reasons for the industrial revolution and climate change as we know it today – has now become where we preserve the world's seeds.' In this sense, the khabya is a symbol and tool of resistance: an indigenous, rural pushback against the impersonal forces that control agriculture, from monopolizing agrochemical corporations such as Monsanto to, yes, ICARDA, whose hybrid seed varieties have increasingly replaced local breeds. In this, Cache (Insurance Policy) rolls out a juxtaposition with a long view: while coal is mined for one-time use, a seed can potentially renew forever.

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Cache (Insurance Policy) closes a loop that began with Manna's 2016 installation Post Herbarium. The work was inspired by, and in part reproduces, a collection of plant specimens established in the late 19th century by George Post at the American University in Beirut. Post was a missionary, botanist and surgeon who relocated to the Near East from New York to teach and practise medicine. Like many a determined Christian, he was driven by a zeal to truly know the Holy Lands, convert its inhabitants and lead them to the light of modern scientific enquiry. (In 1883, he published the pioneering text, Flora of Syria, Palestine and Sinai.)

Jumana Manna, *A Magical Substance Flows into Me*, 2016, video stills.
Courtesy: the artist and CRG Gallery, New York

The centrepiece of Post Herbarium is a three-dimensional still life featuring a bust of Post himself. Wooden facsimiles of plants held within the herbarium rise from his ceramic head, like a surreal floral speech bubble, while a nearby shelf displays wooden reproductions of the original archival sheets that have been laser-cut with gaping, plant-shaped holes. On another wall is a small, seemingly generic collage of a landscape, which Manna has constructed from tiny photographs of natural sites that have been peeled off the containers of household cleaning products bought in Beirut supermarkets. The empty, scrubbed bottles have been placed unobtrusively in the corner, as if waiting to be repurposed for water collection.

Much of Manna's work is concerned with teasing out the violence hidden in beautiful things, which might include, as she has written, 'a herbarium sheet, a botanical garden or a seed sprouting in a lab'. Post's civilizing mission to the Near East was part of a broader 19th-century impulse to explore, categorize and taxonomically own these lands – to organize a landscape from selective snippets of information, just as Manna does in her collage. While both the seed vault and the herbarium are the product of forms of enquiry that seem, on the surface, impeccably well-intentioned, they each make use of a set of scientific tools that laid the groundwork for a project of colonial expropriation which irrevocably changed the fate of the region.

Violence and beauty are also central to one of Manna's best-known films, A Magical Substance Flows into Me (2016). The archival key here is Robert Lachmann, a German-Jewish musicologist who moved to Jerusalem from Berlin in the 1930s. Lachmann was an expert in 'oriental music' and among his many projects was a shortlived radio show of that name on the Palestine Broadcasting Service, which featured both lectures and live performances by local musicians.

Manna's film takes Lachmann's programme as its blueprint: she seeks out musicians working in these traditions, plays them a fragment of the original show and asks for a performance in return. From Kurdish Jews to Bedouin Muslims and Coptic Christians, Manna locates skilled representatives and engages them in conversations that veer from the awkward (the retired Kurdish policeman who doesn't understand Manna's project) to the heartwarming (the deep network of family connections revealed in conversations). The music, it seems, is alive and well. Here, the slow patience of the camera allows the scenes to breathe, even within claustrophobic settings (a number are kitchens, one of which belongs to Manna's own family). It is telling that the artist goes to visit the musicians, rather than vice versa: the segregated demarcations of the former Palestine hover in the background, while the musicians' talents and backstories take centre stage.

The epic proportions and restrained style of the story sketched by A Magical Substance Flows into Me would have pleased Benjamin – formally, at least. The year that Benjamin published his impassioned defence of the good tale, 1936, was the same year that Lachmann launched 'Oriental Music'. It also marks the first major Arab uprising in Palestine, one that was primarily aimed at their British colonizers and partially in response to British support of a militarized Zionist state. As a European Jewish intellectual with a very public investment in the diverse cultural traditions of North Africa and the Near East, Lachmann's unusual and implicitly utopian project was poorly timed, to say the least.

Lachmann's show ended a year after it began, having been roundly critiqued in both the Arab and Hebrew press. Manna's film, in tracing the programme's ambitions, suggests that music's ability to transcend otherwise insurmountable differences – its potential as a form of communication beyond language; what she has called 'a libidinal form or a muscle memory' – is also its propensity to gloss over the issues. At one point, Manna's camera crew is invited into the office of a musician who is, by day, an Israeli land surveyor. The office has no problem with the crew filming the maps on their walls ('Table of Land Expropriation According to Plan 4558') and the fine view of settlements from the window. The music, needless to say, is exquisite.

Wild Relatives ends on a moving musical note. A forbidding view of the Arctic is lent a flutey buoyancy by an old-fashioned pop song, the first few bars of which are pointedly subtitled. 'Baadana' (After Us) is a darkly romantic tune that was first recorded in the late 1950s and is performed here by the Lebanese singer Aida Chalhoub. 'After us', Chalhoub croons, 'who would

water the grapevines? Who would fill the baskets? Who would pick the grape leaves?' For the Arab listener, this intimates displacement, leaving a lovingly tended home behind. But, in Wild Relatives, the song becomes a cheerful portent of climate disaster. Like a modern-day vanitas it hints that, one day, this may all be gone: the grapevines, the agriculture, humans. But, in the meantime, Manna's work reminds us, we still have nature, history and human desire, and the many stories they tell about the possibilities of resilience.

Main Image: Jumana Manna, Wild Relatives, *2018, video stills. Director of photography: Marte Vold. Courtesy: the artist*

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