

## Focus Interview: Jumana Manna

Films and sculptures about ambiguity and materiality



BY OMAR KHOLEIF IN **INTERVIEWS** | 30 MAY 14



**Omar Kholeif** *The issue of proximity is key to your work. In your video *The Umpire Whispers* (2010), for instance, you negotiate an intimate relationship with your swimming coach.*

**Jumana Manna** In that work, I revisited massage sessions between me and my coach during my teenage years as a competitive swimmer in Jerusalem. I was interested in the borders of intimacy and the dynamics of power between coach and athlete, within this context of sport and nationalism. I have a need for physical and mental closeness to my materials and subjects. But when trying to understand events or characters within their broader context, a certain distance is also needed. This is one negotiation of proximity. I grew up as a Palestinian in Israel, making me both a member and an enemy of the state. I later lived in different cities: Oslo, Los Angeles and now Berlin. I speak their languages and experience their realities, but seem to always have one foot somewhere else. This ambiguity is something I have always lived with.

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'Menace of Origins', 2014, installation view at SculptureCenter, New York. Courtesy: the artist and SculptureCenter, New York

**OK** *Blessed Blessed Oblivion (2010)*, is part homage to Kenneth Anger, part exploration of a group of male thugs in East Jerusalem. Again, the proximity to your subjects is essential: you don't fetishize the young men but, in a sense, become embroiled in their chaos.

**JM** I wanted to make a film about the unflattering men in my hometown with whom I have a great sense of empathy. I met Ahmad, the protagonist of *Blessed Blessed Oblivion*, through my hairdresser. He opened up to me, and I followed him on his nightly adventures. Even if he was performing his idea of a powerful man, we had a certain shared desire and mutual vulnerability. I didn't feel like I was exploiting his trust but that we were both exposing and negotiating our positions. This understanding allowed me to get close to, and capture, a world I wasn't otherwise a part of.

**OK** *How do you choose the subjects for your films?*

**JM** It's always intuitive. Usually, it's an encounter with an individual, dead or alive, who I need to get closer to. I am haunted by the past, but allergic to nostalgia. Sometimes I need to rid myself of a fear. Other times, broadly, I'm trying to understand what brought us here. I'm never satisfied by one position, so I layer things and trust that connections will be drawn, since they grow out of my experiences.

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**OK** *A Sketch of Manners and The Goodness Regime* (both 2013), made in collaboration with Sille Storihle, re-imagine historical acts. However, it strikes me that there is something anti-monumental in how you portrayed these histories.



*The Goodness Regime*, (with Sille Storihle), 2013, video still.  
Courtesy: the artists, CRG Gallery, New York, and Kunsthall Oslo

**OK** *Why is satire so important to you?*

**JM** I think it can be a tool of resistance that doesn't carry the same weight as activism nor the weariness of *realpolitik*. It's playful, which allows it to reach broad audiences, but it's also deadly serious. Importantly, it's not cynical. I think cynicism is one of the biggest problems of our time. Satire can be simultaneously conspicuous and empathetic.

**OK** *You work in sculpture as well as in film. How does one medium relate to the other for you?*

**JM** I've often thought of my sculptures as condensations, or extractions, of the narratives I explore through time in the moving image. Sculpture is a place where I can explore abstraction – where specificity is withdrawn in favour of more constant principles or truths – more precisely than in film. Film can be abstract, but I also want to tell stories with it, unrolling images and narratives. I find sculpture more apt for exploring the spirited aspect of materiality, and the physical relationship our bodies negotiate with objects, spaces and materials. I am interested in how objects are carriers or agents, just as our bodies are vessels of subjectivity.

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For a recent project in Norway, for example, I made three casts of the pillars of the government building that the right-wing Christian extremist Anders Breivik bombed on the 22 July 2011. I was interested in the role of these pillars in this attack, as guards and anchors, which both protected the high-rise from collapsing, but that also served as forms into which memory and ideology were embedded. In my show earlier this year, 'Menace of Origins', at SculptureCenter, New York, I created a series of works that explore the political dimensions of material culture in Silwan, East Jerusalem. I juxtaposed archaeological forms and the relics of male thug culture in order to reflect upon how materials and goods come to fashion identities and reify performances of power in the neighbourhood.

Sculpture is elevating and emancipatory, but sometimes it's painful, too. I don't always like the labour and it's lonelier than filmmaking. I've tried to completely stop doing sculpture in favour of filmmaking in the past, but I have never managed it. The ideas culminate and nag at me and I have to relieve myself of them. It is a kind of exorcism. Then I can make way for the next film.

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Jumana Manna lives and works in Berlin, Germany. In 2014, she had a solo exhibition at SculptureCenter, New York, USA. In 2013, she had solo shows at Kunsthall Oslo, Norway; Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; and participated in the Sharjah Biennial 11, UAE; The Bergen Assembly 2013, Norway; Performa 13, New York; and the International Film Festival Rotterdam, the Netherlands.