

The New York Times

CRITIC'S PICK

In Jumana Manna's Film, a Wild Plant Crosses the Political Line

A Palestinian artist explores how Israel's ban on foraging a spiny vegetable reverberated beyond the kitchen.

By Will Heinrich

Sept. 29, 2022

We hear a lot about violence in Israel and the occupied territories. We don't hear quite as much about the softer edges of living in what has been called an "apartheid state" — the absurdity, the insanity, the ever-present anxiety. But that absurdity, with its undertones of anger and resignation, provides the background of Jumana Manna's "Foragers" (2022), one of two excellent, nearly feature-length films that dominate the Palestinian artist's first major American museum show at MoMA PS1.

In "Foragers," Manna's subject is akkoub, a spiny thistle-like vegetable that Palestinians like to cook into meat stews after harvesting it from the wild in Galilee, the Golan Heights, and around Jerusalem, among other places. (The film also deals with za'atar, likewise said to taste better when gathered in nature.) In the early 2000s, Israel's Nature and Parks Authority outlawed this traditional foraging, saying that it endangered the plants. The prohibition applied to all Israelis, Jewish or Arab — but Jewish Israelis don't really eat akkoub or, if they do, they'll buy it from a kibbutz where it grows in orderly rows.

Using a judicious mix of documentary material and re-enactments, Manna efficiently lets us in on the whole situation. We watch a pair of her own older relatives foraging among the ruins of their native village, razed by Israel during the 1948 war; a pair of Parks Authority officers armed with pistols issuing fines; a woman selling a pile of akkoub on the street; and half a dozen different Palestinians giving an offscreen interrogator evasive or confrontational explanations for the white plastic bags that have been found in their possession, bags full of innocuous vegetables. One woman says that akkoub is actually dying out in the wild because, like any plant, it "needs to be trimmed"; several insist they're just trying to feed their children, only to be accused, in turn, of being "dealers." (At least one of them is.)



Gathering akkoub, a spiny wild vegetable, is only the beginning. As shown in this still from the film "Foragers," it also requires laborious pruning and cleaning before it can be cooked. Jumana Manna

HOLLYBUSH GARDENS

In 2020, the rules were changed to allow gathering of akkoub for personal use, so long as the roots are not damaged. But if you're watching "Foragers" as an art piece rather than as a straight documentary, this development hardly changes its impact: Harassment of people gathering a wild green said to taste like artichoke, whether or not this particular harassment is still happening, is a perfectly intelligible stand-in for all the other tools a modern state can use to tell people they're unwanted.

With the film as your only information, you also wouldn't know for sure whether the original prohibition was intended to uproot a Palestinian cultural practice; to create new markets for Jewish farmers, as Manna implies; or actually just to conserve the environment. What is made clear is how quickly mistrust can multiply once such a rule is on the books. The authorities will start treating ordinary people like lawbreakers, and those ordinary people, in turn, start lying and sneaking around.

Manna's other film, "Wild Relatives" (2018), focuses on the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway, which aims to stockpile and safeguard the genetic diversity of the world's agricultural crops by storing examples of as many seeds as possible, as well as another such gene bank that used to be in Aleppo, Syria.

"Wild Relatives" doesn't hit quite as hard as "Foragers," perhaps because its content isn't quite as personal for Manna, who was born in Princeton, N.J., but raised in Jerusalem. (She has also studied in Oslo and Los Angeles and currently lives in Berlin.) But it's equally beautiful to look at, and it exhibits the same accomplished balance of exposition and scenery.

After war broke out in Syria, the NGO that ran the gene bank relocated to Lebanon — as did many Syrians, some of whom, including young girls, ended up as agricultural laborers. The NGO, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas, or Icarda, borrowed seeds from Svalbard to regrow its gene bank, the first such withdrawals ever made from the so-called doomsday vault; eventually their crops flourished enough that they could return what they had borrowed.



Jumana Manna's 2018 video "Wild Relatives" takes on agriculture, refugees and seed banks in Norway and Lebanon. Jumana Manna

As in "Foragers," you're left to draw your own conclusions about intractable moral complexities, both large and small. The Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad offered land to Icarda as part of his drive to modernize Syrian agriculture — but he modernized Syrian agriculture, Manna tells us in voice-over, in order to assert control over the rural peasantry.

There's something strangely reassuring about Manna's bird's-eye view of her subjects. It reminds you that the world's problems persist not only because of greed or hatred or malevolence, but because they're actually very complicated.

In the context of all this heady ambiguity, Manna's sculptures, a series of large ceramic boxes with slick finishes, work fairly well. Wall text explains that they're inspired by traditional Levantine grain-storage structures, but even knowing that, you may wonder what exactly they're doing here and where you're supposed to stand while looking at them. As a complement to her films, though, their uncertainty becomes suggestive, pushing you to wonder about the cultures and geographies you normally take for granted.

Jumana Manna: Break, Take, Erase, Tally

Through April 17, 2023. MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, Queens; 718-784-2086; momaps1.org.