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## ***Mandy Merzaban interviews artist Larissa Sansour***

**MM: In video works such as *Bethlehem Bandolero* and *A Space Exodus* you reference Western film genres, applying their plots and clichés to a Palestinian context. Your use of these dramatics is often in an overtly ironic and political way. What message do you strive to send with this approach and do you see any risks conceptually in making blunt statements in artwork?**

**LS:** In my work, I often resort to fictionalised space to address current political realities. In the case of Palestine, the political reality on the ground has taken such a dramatic development that it is more surreal to address the situation in an understated way, rather than resort to hyperbole. Sometimes and as in the case of Palestine, the political reality can reach such an impasse that regular methods of addressing the problem are rendered futile.

I don't see my work as being direct or blunt in its statements. In my work, I usually posit a parallel universe in which current political realities can be addressed. My work is not necessarily didactic, but offers a new way of looking at approaching the problem at hand.

In *Bethlehem Bandolero* and *A Space Exodus*, I attempt to create scenarios where the Palestinian is no longer the victim, but instead enjoys the same power as anyone else in our media-driven, entertainment-led world. The people who are usually the subject of news reports and diplomatic initiatives instead become the commentators. No longer the underdogs, they stand at the same level as the rest of the world's media and power-players.

**MM: In some of your work, you are a primary persona or protagonist, particularly in your video works *A Space Exodus*, where your name is labelled on your space suit, *Land Confiscation*, *Run Lara Run*, as well as the preliminary photos for *Nation Estate*. Why have you chosen to implicate yourself in your work? Can you elaborate on how your presence in your artwork has become integral in your creative practice?**

In my early works, I included myself as the primary protagonist due to budget restrictions. I simply did not have the funds to hire real actors. Since those early works, my own presence in my pieces has become sort of a signature. It has also gradually become clear that a certain performative quality is lost if I don't take part in my own work. By now, it seems as if the acts carried out by my

protagonists only make overall sense if they are embodied by one single person, and that person simply, virtually by default, happens to be me.

I also tend to involve my family quite a bit. My sister and brother feature in several of my pieces. Even they have become part of the signature by now. I guess that working with people I know extremely well gives me a high degree of certainty that I can get the results I am hoping for. In my dialogue pieces, for example, it is crucial for me that the people involved are not afraid to delve into politically sensitive issues. The unpredictable nature of these conversations still needs a certain framework in order to make sense. And such a framework, I find, is most easily established by surrounding myself with people whose convictions and performative qualities I am familiar with. My sister and brother will also join me on the set of the *Nation Estate* film – in which I will once again be acting as the female protagonist.

**MM: What is your view of the label ‘political artist’?**

LS: I have a hard time seeing how art can be separated from politics. I think the concept of Art for the sake of Art is a mantra that gets repeated often, but that does not make much sense in the long run. Politics have always been inseparable from art throughout its history. It is hard to imagine an autonomous piece of work that is not conditioned by its context. I guess certain artists are more directly or overtly politically engaged than others, and if they need to be labelled “political artists” for easier categorisation, I don’t see a big problem with that.

As many other artists, especially from the Middle East, I see that there is an urgency in referencing worldwide politics, and I do feel that art is a potent tool in achieving or affecting political change, no matter how slight, provided it always functions on its own premises and is not taken out of the artistic discourse.

**MM: In your preliminary photographs for the project *Nation Estate*, you envision the establishment of a Palestinian state within a futuristic concrete and metal edifice. Housing both Palestine’s people and landmarks, floors are connected by an elevator, thereby shielding residents from draconian Israeli checkpoints. The building’s windows overlook historical sites such as the Dome of Rock, giving a timeless sense of loss and separation. How does this narrative comment on a future Palestinian state?**

LS: *Nation Estate* is a project I have been thinking about for a long time. When I first got the idea for the project, its working title was *Living the High Life*. With Israeli settlement activity confiscating more and more Palestinian land, my idea was that for any future Palestinian state to emerge, one would have to think vertically. Now the project has finally found its proper form in

the shape of a sci-fi photo series and short film. The decision to finally realise it came in the wake of the Palestinian bid for nationhood at the UN.

Set within a grim piece of hi-tech architecture, *Nation Estate* envisions an ambiguously dystopian Palestinian state rising from the ashes of the peace process. In this vision, Palestinians have their state in the form of a single skyscraper: the *Nation Estate*. Surrounded by a concrete wall, this colossal high-rise houses the entire Palestinian population – finally living the high life. Each city has its own floor: Jerusalem, on the third floor; Ramallah, on the fourth floor. Intercity trips previously marred by checkpoints are now made by elevator.

Aiming for a sense of belonging, the lobby of each floor re-enacts iconic squares and landmarks – elevator doors on the Jerusalem floor opening onto a full-scale Dome of the Rock. Built just outside the actual city of Jerusalem, the building has views of the original golden dome from the top floors.

In the film, we see a short narrative unfold. The main story takes place mostly in the elevator, but various floors from the building will also be revealed. I will be playing the main character in the film – as I have done on several previous occasions.

In the completed film and photo version of *Nation Estate*, the preliminary photos developed for the Lacoste Elysée Prize 2011 and since banned by the sponsor, French fashion giant Lacoste, will also be part of the installation. Having been at the centre of a major censorship scandal, these three photos have taken on a life of their own and become a central element of the entire project.

**MM: The removal of your nomination and the outcry that followed has drawn attention to the artwork itself. Do you regard this as beneficial to the ambition of the work overall?**

Lacoste's decision certainly generated more publicity than the prize itself could have ever provided. This is, of course, a very fortunate outcome, not only for the work itself and for me as an artist. Seeing Lacoste held accountable in this manner was a small victory for artistic expression as such. What was particularly positive about this experience was the museum's decision to side with the artist instead of the corporate sponsor. Not to mention the massive public reaction to Lacoste's behaviour. The public support was absolutely crucial. Without that, events would not have turned out the way they did.

I originally issued my press release stating my case against Lacoste's decision purely for the sake of putting it on record. I simply wanted it to be known that I had not accepted the removal of my work silently. I never anticipated that my statement would get the kind of reaction it did. Within 24 hours, the story was picked up by mainstream news worldwide – from Japan to Brazil. I am eternally grateful for all the support I received. It has been truly overwhelming.

The Lacoste episode also brought a new angle to the Palestinian issue to the mainstream media. Exposing a clear-cut act of political censorship generates exactly the kind of attention that the censoring body is trying to avoid. The massive attention the work has received means that I will get the opportunity to show it in a range of exciting places. Showing the work and letting it speak for itself is, of course, what any artist wants for any new production, so I am very grateful that the attention following the Lacoste controversy has given me these new opportunities.