

The World of Rula Halawani

Text courtesy of Selma Feriani Gallery, London



Traces, Traces series, 2014. thirty two framed C-prints and iPad. 16x22x3cm. each. Courtesy of Selma Feriani Gallery.

Rula Halawani is an internationally prominent Palestinian photography artist currently residing in her hometown District of Mount of Olives within the region of East Jerusalem, where her family has now lived for several generations. During the 7th June 1967 the Israeli Army met their objectives by completing its occupation of East Jerusalem and West Bank.

By the end of this month and completely ignoring the stand of the United Nations, the international community and whilst violating the international law, the ruling Israeli government decided unilaterally to annex East Jerusalem.

Ever since, Israel authorities consider Palestinians who live in Jerusalem as mere residents in the state of Israel and therefore having no rights whatsoever as citizens.

Aged 18 years old, Rula completed for her very first time, a traveling application. When required to disclose

her nationality, she did so by stating that she was born Palestinian. Eventually, she got her traveling visa granted but to her dismay, her nationality had been deliberately changed from Palestinian to Jordanian. Until today, she has no other option but to continue using and traveling with this visa document, an official document that gives her freedom to move back and forth but nevertheless one does not recognize her as a Palestinian citizen. As a result, this imposed identity, brings her nothing else but long-term uncertainty by jeopardizing her security to stay in both Jerusalem and Palestine. Ultimately, this externally imposed identity formally makes her a foreigner in her own land, and to certain extent, it is yet another one of many draconian laws that clearly defines the abrupt relationship between those who find themselves being occupied and those who are unrightfully occupying.

Rula originally trained as a photojournalist and in 1989 kick-started her career as a freelance photographer. Following the steps of other renowned local photojournalists she went on to documenting the demolishing of Palestinian homes, confiscations of their lands and frequently capturing happenings such as young Palestinians defending their territory by means of retaliating unwelcome Israeli soldiers and Army vehicles (throwing stones and petrol bombs at them), Israeli soldiers and settlers shooting at kids, the unlawful arrests of many Palestinians, etc. *'From the start, it was never an easy job. I could not place my feelings aside and not get emotionally involved with what I was witnessing and documenting on film at the same time. I always felt part of the stories and gradually I started to realize that there was no way that I could continue working only within the realm of photojournalism. In April 1997, I traveled to Hebron to cover a demonstration. At some point teenage kids appeared out of nowhere, all of them aged about 17 years old. They commenced throwing stones at the Israeli Army. I recognized the kids from the previous year when I had seen them playing soccer and then spoken to them briefly. This time, they were in a far more dangerous scenario and suddenly one of them was injured in the leg, shot by the Israeli Army. Other fellow Palestinians immediately took him away but quickly returned and continued throwing stones again. Within seconds he was shot once again, this time in a fatal shot aimed to his head. He was now lying dead. Having left Hebron I went through all the films used and I spotted that the same kid that had been killed still had a stone in his hand. This scared and confused me. I asked myself: Why did he come back to die? Why do people sacrifice themselves for land? But after having witnessed his death and going through all the photo material I started to understand more clearly: What is the use of people without a land to live on? This boy's death was my turning point; I could not continue to be a photojournalist. I wanted to carry on telling our stories but in a different manner. Whilst being a photojournalist, what I had enjoyed the most was capturing people's daily life so I decided to follow on this path. I wanted to show what lay beyond the news... the people's struggle for returning to a normal life, their ability to create and celebrate their own culture despite all the suffering surrounding them. People adamantly dancing, getting married, going on family*

trips, laughing, swimming and even shopping. I was now interested in exploring more artistic ways of telling their story and therefore I started developing far more conceptual photography projects.

Her subjective involvement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict led her to move on from photojournalism, questioning its authenticity and value in the media domain and turned her attention to the visual arts and has worked as a professional artist since 1988. Rula's investigatory nature led her into discussions with many Palestinian refugees about the villages they lived in before they fled their homes in 1948, and soon discovered that the interiors of their new dwellings kept alive the memories from their old life. Simple household objects, gifts from friends or deceased family members, photographs and official documents make up this matrix of a life and time that had to be abandoned. For instance on her photographic series *Traces*, items are used as heroic symbols, like a simple basket carrying eggs representing the bravery and courage of a mother. After she and her husband had been forced to flee their home during the night, Nawal Nakhleh's mother snuck back into her home in order to grab basic food they needed to survive the journey ahead. Other powerful motif or symbols are found within the photographic composition, objects such as keys acting as reminders of the families' lost homes; passed from generation to generation so that they are never to forget their roots... *'Keys are the symbols of our right to return... make them understand that this refugee camp is not their home. I visually explored and documented the abandoned homes of these refugee families and I asked them why they chose to keep certain particular items, and what symbolic meaning they held for them'*. These objects are a constant, heart-warming reminder of a life remembered and missed. What it may appear unimportant to us, actually carries a very personal story to them, stories of displacement as well as heartache but also of pride and hope. Halawani has worked on numerous series of photographs that capture these transformations in the current political period, from the perspective of someone who has lived through and experienced those changes first hand. *'Everyone wants to have an identity. This is the right of every individual. An individual has the right to choose who they are. The Israeli authorities believe there is not*



The Wall # 2, Wall series, 2005, digital archival print, 126x96cm, Courtesy of Selma Feriani Gallery.

such thing as a Palestinian. In many ways identity is the most fundamental thing in each subject's life and gives to every person a feeling of belonging and location. For me my nationality is my identity, my land is my identity'

Another of her acclaimed series is *Presence and Impressions*. Composed of nine diptychs, this body of work features found photography from historical archives, depicting the once thriving settlements, homes and agricultural landscapes from nine Palestinian villages, prior to the 1948 mass depopulation of the Palestinian land, also known as the Nakba. Creating a stark contrast against these historical images, Halawani has revisited and photographed the sites upon which these villages existed to document their contemporary status as barren, vacant and devoid of humanity. These images are captured within a highly emotive and haunting series of black

and white photographs and intentionally positioned parallel to the original historical images. Provoking a highly visceral response and reflection, these new images portray the artist's personal investment in returning to the site of historical and cultural memory: *'For years I had been thinking of creating a project inspired by these abandoned and destroyed villages. Actually, "thinking" would not be the appropriate word; I was trying to forget about this project by getting involved in others. But it was like this idea kept crawling itself upon me, refusing to let me abandon it'*. Whether she's photographing the division wall built by Israel to imprison the Palestinians and fragment their remaining land (*Wall series*); or representing the psychologically disconnected, yet physically close, interactions between Israeli soldiers and Palestinian civilians at the nearly six hundred



The Wall # 3, Wall Series, 2005, digital archival print, 126x96cm. Courtesy of Selma Feriani Gallery.

check points that restrict the movement of Palestinians throughout their land; or whether she's photographing a savage incursion by the Israeli military into a Palestinian city; or reflecting on her status as a potential "unperson" in the Jewish State; Rula's photographs always transcend the documentary tradition of photography by depicting a seemingly surreal and improbable world that should only exist in a terrible nightmare. Yet, nothing in her work is invented or imagined. Her images depict traces of a culture being pushed, before our very eyes, into oblivion by its occupiers. A Palestinian culture that although is perpetually stressed and tattered, refuses to break or disappear. Rula Halawani's camera is not only an extension of her eye, but also her humanity and her cultural and political identity. Her camera acts as a bridge that connects us to her subject, Palestine,

and conveys an intimate albeit troubling vision of that land and its people. Rula's eyes carefully observe and her photographs poetically depict, the nightmare of occupation in stark and haunting images.

Halawani continues exhibiting at prominent arts and culture institutions internationally, including the *Arab World Institute* in Paris, the *Khaled Shoman Foundation*, Jordan the *Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston, etc. Her artwork has been acquired by major art institutions and museums such as the British Museum and the V&A in London, the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, the Nadour Collection in Germany and by the *Khaled Shoman Foundation* in Jordan. Halawani is the Founder and Director of the Photography Unit at the Birzeit University in Palestine. She currently lives and works in East Jerusalem's Mount of Olives neighborhood.