

Preservation and conservation as a metaphor for resistance

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While Palestinian artists are this year questioning themselves about the sense of producing art in the current political and social climate, the art market is not. The market goes on, never asking questions about meaning, leaving this task to artists themselves.

In this chilly Parisian autumn, this faceless entity called “the art market” took the shape of the art fair AsiaNow in the French capital, a highly curated event in the historic La Monnaie building. I met Palestinian artist Mirna Bamieh in its courtyard; she is an exhibitor at the fair and participating in a talk.

“This year I produced a crazy amount of work,” Mirna told me. She has artworks not only at her booth at the fair and her solo show at the Paris space of Nika Gallery, but also another solo at the Institute of Contemporary Arts at NYU Shanghai. Why so busy?

“Making art was one way for me to grieve. Not even to understand grief. Just to grieve.”

The products of this process are all the drawings in the AsiaNow booth of Nika Gallery, which came with a re-elaboration of a single sentence from a 13-year-old girl from Gaza who wrote, “Would I be free if I were an object?”

Mirna read this harrowing sentence on the social media pages of the Palestinian Museum. “When I read it, a part of me just left my body,” she explained. “The amount of pain was so much that I needed to process it.” She did this by constructing and deconstructing the sentence in many different ways in the form of drawings.

Sitting in a café just inside La Monnaie, our conversation became an interview, in the same seamless manner that Mirna moves constantly from life to art. “I have been doing art even before I was doing art, you know. Since I was a kid. This is the way I live. This is the way I breathe.”

A nose sprinkled with freckles; an expansive way of moving her hands when she speaks; there is poetry and generosity in Mirna’s manner when she articulates ideas. In her process of art-making, Mirna brings her whole self.





She also brings her culinary studies, of course, and she also studied psychology and theatre, which she tackled before obtaining her Master's degree in Fine Arts. Moreover, a big influence comes from her family, especially her father, a Palestinian doctor who always dreamt of becoming a painter and held art as something sacred, and her Lebanese mother, from whom she inherited a passion for food.

“There were a lot of calls with my grandma, lots of recipe books, lots of creating those social circles,” she recalled. “We’re a family of eaters. All my sisters are very good cooks, and I think it’s because the table was a space for conversation.”



Installation view, *Sour Things* exhibition (2024) by Mirna Bamieh at NIKA Project Space, Paris. [Photo courtesy NIKA Project Space.]

Mirna noted that sometimes in the region cooking has been frowned upon as a constricted space for women. “But it’s actually a very empowered and empowering space,” she insisted. “And very political as well. In Palestine, most of the intifadas [uprisings] were actually cooked in the kitchen. The women were leading, they were cooking, they were feeding. They were holding secret gatherings around the table in the kitchen.”

In this sense, it’s not surprising that Mirna’s first artworks took the shape of dinner performances with recipes that are disappearing from Palestine. Her aim was to reconstruct the stories of the collective through food, which was also a way for her to explore her Palestinianness.

Her current ongoing project, “*Sour Things*”, was conceived during the pandemic, when the artist found herself in her apartment in Ramallah, building a pantry as a way to comfort herself over future uncertainty. “I was filling jars obsessively, fermenting obsessively. And as everything was quieter during COVID, I was literally listening to my jars, the way they whisper, the way they make sounds. I created a universe for myself, to be attuned and to slow down.”

The artist thinks that as humans we can learn from bacteria cultures.

They are a strong metaphor for human behaviour in restricted spaces. “Just think about the way time and power articulate in a jar.”

We are each more than 93 per cent bacteria, she pointed out. It’s an observation that should have us putting things into perspective. “All the knowledge, all the secrets of life, are in those microscopic beings that we do not know and they teach us, and although life will end, the bacteria will be staying. So, we might say that they are our ancestors.”

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The first iteration of “Sour Things” was presented at the last Sharjah Biennale, where it drew the interest of Nika Gallery which is now representing her. The artist was given eight shops from the former vegetable market in Sharjah, within a building from the 70s. Each shop represented one moment of the fermentation process, and next to it was a long table with ceramics. A different iteration of the project was presented late last year in a collective show at the gallery Nika Project Space in Dubai.

The latter was focused on a specific part of the kitchen, the pantry. “This is the place that looks into the future. It’s where you preserve it, it’s where you keep everything in the now and you don’t consume it. You need to have a long sight into the future, where there’s scarcity, where there’s need, where there’s a war, maybe where there’s no accessibility, where something is happening that you cannot control, and you build the backbone of the house in the pantry.”







Besides the exploration of the idea of fermentation, “Sour Things” was generated from Mirna’s need to build a home post-pandemic. “I am Palestinian, but I was fully nomadic for the past 10 years until I recently moved to Lisbon. Being born in a place where your movement is controlled in such an insane way [by the Israeli occupation], I developed a desire to be free. Travel and not having one house gave me that freedom.”

This lifestyle led Mirna to create ephemeral, light works initially. “I had my whole studio within a laptop,” she said.

But then this lightness became a burden for her, and going from residence to residence started to be a very lonely experience. She also felt enslaved to technology, almost controlled by it.

“I felt the need to do something with my hands.”

This is when ceramics, which she started making in 2019, took over from her previous work based on video performance.

Ceramics take centre stage in her current exhibitions. Each piece has details that make it unique, whether in the different kinds of glazing she’s using, or the motives, that can be reminiscent of blood, or that might use repeated numbers that evoke the victims of the war in Gaza.

“In the past few months I have been making, just making, making those pieces and trying to translate emotions into colours and glazes and firing them and creating this alchemy of understanding around them,” she explained. Her move to Lisbon, added Mirna, is a welcome pause from producing so much work.

However, one conviction resonates very strongly with her; whether in a commercial context like the fair, an experimental gallery like Nika, or an institution like Shanghai: she believes in the meaning of standing up for what’s right. “As a Palestinian, all my life I was told that my voice is not important,” she concluded. “But it is. It is very important. It is very important to speak up.”