

## **ASIA CONTEMPORARY ART WEEK (ACAW) FIELD REVIEW ISSUE 2: MIDDLE EAST**

Palestinian Museum  
By Ruba Katrib

The inaugural exhibition of the Palestinian Museum has just opened this August, over a year after its building was first unveiled. While I have not yet seen the building or the exhibition in person, I have witnessed its unfolding through various media outlets, including social media, as well as through conversations with the exhibition's curator, Reem Fadda, who is a friend and colleague.

The significance of the Palestinian Museum is lost on few. Settled on a mountain in the West Bank, the private museum with an international architect, Henenghan Peng from Dublin, is a beacon of Arab (and specifically Palestinian) culture emanating from a place enclosed by extremely restrictive borders. The museum is sparkling new, it looks striking in photos atop a mountain in Ramallah, and it is massive at nearly 40,000 square feet of exhibition space, other public facilities, and sprawling gardens. While Palestine has been host to many smaller project spaces and alternative spaces over the years, a large-scale building on par with the international mega-museum marks a shift in the landscape. The project cost over \$24 million dollars, as reported by a New York Times article that appeared in anticipation of the building's opening in 2016. The museum was also meant to have an opening exhibition, but it was canceled due to internal issues. As a result, the administration decided to leave the building empty for about 14 months, but still while remaining open to visitors. For her exhibition *Jerusalem Lives* (Tayha al Quds), Fadda has curated a show of contemporary art mixed with other documents and materials. Notably, the museum

hasn't been established as an art museum necessarily, but this first gesture of contemporary art is promising. It's potential as a hub for locals and international visitors is palpable. The museum is a significant move to reveal and generate the richness of Palestinian culture, and importantly, it is located within Palestine.

Fadda's exhibition *Jerusalem Lives* (Tayha al Quds) takes the rallying cry of "Tayha al Quds" from a now almost emptied slogan into a sincere provocation. What is Jerusalem today, what is its future? As is asked in the press release for the exhibition, a sentiment put forth by Fadda, "could Jerusalem be considered the quintessential global city?" In a presentation Fadda recently made in a conference that we both were part of in Kolkata, she emphasized that what is happening in Jerusalem can be seen as a bellwether for what will happen in the rest of the world. Jerusalem is one of the original global cosmopolitan cities. It is the center of three major world religions, but it is also more than that. It can also be considered a progenitor of mass media images and souvenirs, for instance the producer of crosses and images of the Dome of the Rock. It is also increasingly partitioned off, segregated, and under surveillance. Are these facets of control and social and political fracturing indicative not only of the future of Jerusalem, but all the other major cities in the world? This is part of Fadda's interrogation.

Maneuvering within these confined social and political spaces, the exhibition is a study of Jerusalem, past, present, and future. A central aspect of the exhibition is an area that focuses on the Dome of the Rock as a point of pride as well as a symbolic burden. The iconic structure in many ways defines Jerusalem, but always points to conflicting historicizing narratives. This rethinking of the images, objects, and terms that have come to define Jerusalem as historically significant are re-contextualized within the current urgency of finding ways forward. The Dome of the Rock is a UNESCO heritage site, but what about the people it purportedly serves literally and symbolically? How is this monument used to attempt to place its publics in an historical condition, versus a contemporary future? Fadda's show broaches these complex questions within a new cultural institution that unabashedly touts Palestinian pride.

While mega-museums are on the rise, and bring with them all sorts of problematics, they also generate tourism and income. Elsewhere in the Arab world, the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi sits in limbo. Another much more anticipated, as well as disparaged, destination museum geared towards the art elite, Guggenheim Abu Dhabi was meant to be an easily accessible place for the frequent layover stop in the United Arab

Emirates for international travelers, with art fairs and biennials nearby. The more challenging to access Palestinian Museum may have the potential to generate cultural exchange that stimulates the local populations as well. It is also interesting to note that Fadda previously worked on the Abu Dhabi project; is it possible that the new institutional center of Arab art and culture may have made a relatively quiet shift from the Emirates to Palestine? This potential is great, and it is possible for the museum to build a strong program that has an international reach, following the waves already created by its first exhibition. But somehow, the Palestinian Museum has already become significant—even when it stood as an empty building—a seemingly unintentional action that has only emphasized the purpose of the architectural structure that is really meant to be filled with objects and people.

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