

Secrets is a self-organized project initiated by the 6+ women's art collective in collaboration with eight Palestinian women artists. Over the course of two years, *Secrets* has been a series of cultural and social exchanges, workshops, several publications, and an exhibition which traveled in the Occupied Territories of Palestine and in the US. Most importantly, this project is an attempt to develop cooperation across enormous geographic and cultural distance, to build solidarities in recognition of our deep interconnectedness.

The project began with the efforts of a small group of women artists. Over the course of several years and half a dozen trips to the West Bank, it has gradually developed into a larger collectivity of artists, cultural producers, institutions, educators, journalists, designers, writers, and social thinkers who have come together across great differences. They have helped us facilitate the production, transport, and exhibition of artwork in the West Bank, navigating the casual brutality of the occupation with grace, intelligence, and courage. They have taught us about resistance. They have cast their voices, in support and protest, against the deafening silence. This project owes its existence to the mobilization of their creative energies.

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Middle Eastern Studies Association Annual Conference, Boston, USA

The Nobel Women's Initiative International Conference, Galway, Ireland

Invent-L Conference 2007: Imaging Place, Gainesville, USA

Exit Art, "Sultana's Dream": SWACC's 10th Anniversary Exhibition, NYC, USA

Toast, Sibell-Wolle Fine Arts Building, University of Colorado, Boulder, USA

Women on the Move: Refugees, Migration and Exile, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

Cover photograph by the 6+ collective

Page 3 image by Sherry Wiggins *Sounds of the Ocean*, (2006)



Secrets Exhibition Venues

International Center of Bethlehem, Palestine, September 2006

Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, Ramallah, Palestine, December 2006

Al Hoash Gallery, Jerusalem, Israel, December 2006

The Paltel Virtual Gallery at Birzeit University, March 2007

The Dairy Center for the Arts, Boulder, CO, USA, April 2007

Glass Curtain Gallery, Columbia College, Chicago, USA, March, 2008

Secrets Participating Artists

Sama Alshaibi, Nadira Araj, Wendy Babcox, Reem Bader, Rana Bishara,
Rozalinda Borcila, Mary Rachel Fanning, Rula Halawani, Nathalie Handal, Shuruq Harb,
Faten Nastas, Yana Payusova, Larissa Sansour, Sherry Wiggins

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SMOLDERING SECRETS

LUCY R. LIPPARD

A cup of empty messages in a room of light, / light that
blinds & blinded men lined up / the young are unable to
die peacefully, I hear a man say. / All is gone: the messy
hair of boys, their smile, / the pictures of ancestors, the
stories of spirits, / the misty hour before sunrise / when
the fig trees await the small hands of a child

– from *War* by Nathalie Handal¹

Years ago I hosted an evening for a Palestinian project and was puzzled by the organizers' apparently exaggerated gratitude. Now I recognize the emotional responses to the Israeli/Palestinian predicament and the way even indisputable facts engender accusations of anti-Semitism. For many, Zionist Israel can do no wrong, even when it breaks its own and international law against an increasingly powerless people. Exaggerated responses often erupt at even casual mentions of the 700,000 Arabs living in the "empty land" destined to become Israel in 1917 (all too reminiscent of Manifest Destiny's appropriation of indigenous land in the New World); or the destruction of over 418 Palestinian villages in 1948, leaving one third of the population on six percent of the land; or the ongoing devastation of homes, orchards, and fields ever since; or the imposition of the wall annexing ten or fifteen percent more Palestinian territory to Israel; or the increasing humiliations and tribulations suffered by people living in and anywhere near the Occupied Territories; or the divisive laws perpetrated by a theocratic society against second-class citizens of another religion that amount to a new apartheid, and so forth. While it is impossible to condone the suicide bombings which, with stone-throwing, provide the prime Palestinian defense against Israel's U.S.-backed military technology, the litany of injustices make such desperate moves all too painfully comprehensible.

This is the unavoidable context within and about which the art in this exhibition was made. Although the artists often use oblique images and personal references to express their grief and resistance, their work provides a challenge to viewers and participants alike. The arts community is always asking how we can be most effective on the issues we care most about. How can artists reflect or inform about the decades-long outrages in the Occupied Territories without being so angry as to be obvious, or so abstract as to seem oblivious? At the same time, artists have a way of infiltrating culture and insinuating opinions where journalists are denied access or are censored, or worse still, self-censor.

Larissa Sansour
Stills from *Happy Days*, (2006)
single-channel video

To add to the layered complexity, not all the artists showing here are Palestinian. Of the six women who formed the 6+ collective, three are American (one with Palestinian ancestry), one is Russian, one is Romanian, and one is British. The collective's stated goal is to work outside of the market, the media, and "the march of armies." With this in mind, they invited eight Palestinian women to join them in a collaborative project and a journey to Palestine that would ground their differences. The art radiates outwards from that central concern. The exhibition was shown in three venues in Palestine. All but one member of the collective was able to visit the Dheisheh refugee camp, where they ran an art and journaling workshop for young girls.



Installation View,
Al Hoash Gallery,
Jerusalem

photo by Rana Bishara

Although feminism wears different faces (some veiled) in different countries, and it is always dangerous to conflate women's needs in different situations, the bonding that took place in the process of this project should inspire more women to go "see for themselves." Until then, we see through the artists' eyes. Shuruq Harb looks at her own culture with an unyielding feminist gaze in *Traces of Honor*. The five close-up photos of disturbed earth and unidentifiable detritus are inspired by three honor killings—in which women are murdered by family members for "dishonoring" them—in her hometown of Ramallah in 2005. Subtle memorials suggesting visits to a secret grave, they constitute her refusal to see these women buried and forgotten. She

describes them as a "re-creation of the body...demanding to be honored rather than buried with disgrace."² Harb's photographs offer a silent dialogue with the dead, enriched by the various cultural meanings of the earth that embraces them.

On the other side of the coin is the work of Faten Nastas, who lives and teaches in Bethlehem. She is concerned with the social and psychological consequences of life in a politically polarized environment – specifically the life of one young martyr, Daniel Abu Hamameh, who was assassinated on Easter, 2006. Her video is viewed not on a screen but in complete "immersion," by inserting one's head into a white plastic apparatus. Narrated in Arabic by the artist's pleasant voice, it shows baby and childhood pictures of an apparently happy and successful boy ... until the last two images. In the first, Hamameh looks tense and worn; in the second, he lies in his coffin.

One of the secrets that is a subtext to this show is the fact that despite all the hard work of warriors, politicians, and activists, the situation in the Middle East remains hidden from the general public in the United States. The surprise that greeted Jimmy Carter's brave if not always accurate book³ is an indicator of our national ignorance. As Tex Kerschen, a curator of the 2003 Houston exhibition *Made in Palestine*, said after visiting there: "Everything I used to believe about Palestine is wrong."⁴ Knowledge and some understanding of each artist's background are necessary for intelligent viewing, as are some detours around the way we are taught to look at art. This exhibition demands we pry into its secrets for the health of our own society.

There is an understandable preoccupation with the wall, or "separation barrier," that not only separates Israelis from Palestinians but Palestinians from each other. Previously five-minute journeys now take two or three hours, fulfilling Ariel Sharon's 1973 prediction: "We'll make a pastrami sandwich of them, we'll insert a strip of Jewish

settlements in between the Palestinians, and then another strip of Jewish settlements right across the West Bank so that in twenty-five years, neither the United Nations nor the United States, nobody, will be able to tear it apart.”⁵ This strategy, as Michael Sorkin has remarked, is couched in the language of planning: “the lingua franca of ordering space...the wall is a very concrete proposition about the boundary between Israel and Palestine, supposedly still the subject of negotiation.”⁶

Rula Halawani, who grew up in the West Bank and teaches at Birzeit University, photographed the wall from the beginning, and eventually saw it built right down the middle of her road to work. Rather than making the wall transparent, as one Israeli artist has suggested,⁷ Halawani demonstrates its political and material opaqueness. A striking diptych conveys the transformation of the wall for her—from merely ugly to the source of real fear. In previous work she has printed her photographs in negative, to emphasize this dark side—a reversal that, like dreams and thoughts in the middle of the night, conveys a heightened drama.



Larissa Sansour (born in Jerusalem to a Russian mother and Palestinian father) was forced to leave her homeland after the first Intifada and studied abroad. *Happy Days* is the ironic title of her video about life under Israeli occupation. The American TV show theme music is intended “to subjugate international politics to a format normally associated with entertainment and thereby call attention to the blurry boundary between the two.” As smiling people and Israeli soldiers go about their business under the shadow of checkpoints and wall, the filmed movement is cheerily speeded up in tune with the beat. The Israeli Army plays “itself,” while Sansour stars as “The Palestinian” showing her permit, simultaneously showing the absurdity of the whole process.

Installation view:
Khalil Sakakini Cultural
Center, Ramallah, 2006

photo by Rana Bishara

While all of the artists in this show use photographic mediums, their work cannot be called strictly documentary. Photography has become pervasive in 21st century global contemporary art, but it holds a special meaning in a country so heavily surveilled by its enemy, so ubiquitous in the bad news. In addition, Palestinian art, long known for its sophistication, has been called “circumspect, and charged with strong slow-burning emotions. It is densely packed with history, both the recent fifty-five years of Israeli occupation and also the several thousand years of history that preceded it.”⁸ The artists in *Secrets* answer this description even as they conform to no stereotypes of “Arab art.” Among them are those trying to maintain a daily life in a war zone and those who are dispossessed, in voluntary and involuntary exile.

Many of these artists chose not to address the subject of occupation in head-on documentary style, but to see Palestine’s crisis through the lenses of their own and others’ lives, reflecting the feminist understanding that the personal is political. But with a history like that of the Middle East, the reverse is perhaps still truer. The political is inescapably personal when it affects every life it touches. While this is certainly true of the U.S. as well, we often tend to forget it in our privilege and comfort. Although she is a naturalized American, Sama Alshaibi’s photographs of herself and her three cousins memorialize from a two-generation distance their grandfather’s lost dreams of peace and reunion with his family in an unoccupied Palestine. The three young women stare straight at



the camera, as though daring it to misrepresent them. The handwritten texts note the effects of heightened nationalism on women's lives: "From each direction someone yelled at us," she writes of a checkpoint experience at the al-Aqsa Mosque—"the Israeli soldiers, the Arab men, their mother (my khala). Our skirts weren't long enough, Sumia was wearing jeans, Arwa's hijab was falling off. Noor was having her period, but she insisted on praying... 'Allah doesn't accept the prayers of young women...' she whispered. I couldn't hear the rest."



Top: Rana Bishara
*Secretive Facts,
Pending Families*,
detail, (2006)

Bottom:
Rula Halawani
The Wall
detail, (2006)

Rana Bishara, who was born in Tarsheha and has studied in the U.S., tells the story of a single mother and five children living in forced squalor in East Jerusalem, while the father is unemployed in the West Bank and denied entry to Jerusalem. She parallels this tragedy with photographs evoking a sense of melancholy and terror: windows, corridors, gently blowing curtains, ruins, the tent in which a middle-class family is confined after their home was destroyed. She also includes an unrelenting list of facts and statistics, such as: "Between 1967 and 1994 Israel confiscated 24.8 square kilometers of the land in East Jerusalem, 80% of it belonging to Palestinians.... Today a mere 7% of the area of East Jerusalem remains available to Palestinians." In the *Made in Palestine* show, Bishara's installation, *Blindfolded History*, was fifty-five hanging glass plates (for the fifty-five years since al-Nakba, or the catastrophe of 1948), silkscreened with photographs printed in chocolate, which resembles dried blood. "My artwork," she says, "is a bloodless wound that carries a wounded memory."

Photography is most accessible when it is *memorable*—both in the sense of images that we can't erase and images that trigger our own memories. Nadira Araj prompts this flickering of memory in her video *Talk Through the Sand*, in which there is in fact no talking, just the camera's slow procession, accompanied by religious music, into what appears to be an ancient tomb, across worn stone floors, past stone pillars to a marble receptacle filled with sand where a number of thin candles are lit (by a woman) and then extinguished (by a man). The effect is initially reverent and hopeful, until the dreams and prayers are extinguished by reality.

A similar disillusionment seems to inform the series of four portraits by British artist Wendy Babcox. A preadolescent girl is first seen from the knees down, standing in a flowering field, then wearing a wrestler's mask on her face (perhaps harboring secret plots not yet hatched), then with a skull mask on the back of her head, and finally lying on the ground with a bouquet of flowers on her chest. This final image can be read as a death or a romantic swoon—tied into the Palestinian dilemma or simply a personal crisis of puberty.

Reem Bader (born in Ramallah and now living in Jordan) takes up a theme familiar to feminist art that is given a poignant twist by the Middle Eastern context. Her anxiety about aging is expressed by the bare feet struggling through desert sand, which becomes a metaphor for her people's anguish. As poet Mahmoud Dawish has written, "were the olive trees to remember those who planted them, their oil would turn into tears."⁹ The use of sand by Araj and Bader raises the specter not only of place but of arid place, suggesting the aquifers corralled and controlled by Israel's prodigious dependence on irrigation, leaving Palestinian farmland and families parched.

Nostalgic place does not figure largely in these artists' work. Most of them are urban, in diaspora, or perhaps too young to have known the green and productive Palestine of the past. Yet as Maymanah Farhat observes in this catalogue, "Palestine remains cemented in the consciousness of its people.... In its current form, Palestine reaches far beyond the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea; it lies all over the world. Its communities, culture, histories and landscapes are carried with its people despite their present day locations."

Place looms more specifically in Rozalinda Borcila's *Disclosure*, a video about her native Romania—another "exotic" destination to North American eyes, defined by its longtime secrecy and post-cold war accessibility. "A meditation on the multiple and often contradictory relationships between secrecy, information, and power," the video consists of four "chapters," each distinguished by strange blurry images of landscapes and a busy plaza that suggest surveillance photography. Borcila ranges from childhood reminiscence to the tale of "Sleeping Beauty" ("timeless, senseless...outside of history") to Dracula Tours in Transylvania, touted as "Europe's best kept secret...preserved in medieval isolation," to the announcement of the fall of the Berlin Wall and a news anchor citing "the popular revolt sweeping Romania." The video ends with a middle-aged couple, close-up and not clearly visible, dancing to an unheard tempo, faster and faster.



Yana Payusova explores a martyrdom rooted

in Russian Orthodox concepts of saintliness and sin—very different from the martyrdom examined by Faten Nastas. Born in Leningrad, Payusova studied in the U.S. and returned there (now St. Petersburg), where she volunteers at prisons with 14-21 year old boys. Her hand-tinted family photographs are treated in the spirit of religious icons and over-painted with little figures suggesting animated film. For instance, a "madonna and child" is the vehicle for an almost comic narrative about giving birth. Her work is intended to reactivate memories of her childhood secrets and review them as an adult seeing through the lens of yet another society in crisis over most of a century.

Mary Rachel Fanning:
My Last Dutchess
Installation view,
Al Hoash Gallery,
Jerusalem

Mary Rachel Fanning also returns to a time beyond her childhood when her grandparents were separated by World War II. Excerpts from their letters are heard on headphones at a homey kitchen table, recalling another era of heroics and nationalism. The accounts of everyday life and wartime missions are presented equally prosaically as Fanning investigates "how western structures support or deflect a time of war" and the deliberate gaps in information that hide between private and public messages. The nostalgia and happy ending of a wartime love story contrasts sharply with the current events presented by the Palestinian artists.

Poet Nathalie Handal was born in Bethlehem. Her participatory performance/installation in this exhibition requests that the viewers write their own secrets (any "undisclosed information") on postcards with an intentionally ambiguous aerial image of what appears to be dry hills. The viewers' stories are deposited in a plexiglass box where they too are visible but illegible. At the end of the exhibition Handal will compose a poem from the secrets

of others. She and the American Sherry Wiggins, alone among the artists in *Secrets*, have actively employed intercultural communications between people in Palestine and the United States. The four photographs in Wiggins' *Sounds of the Ocean* represent dreams she gathered from Palestinian friends in the West Bank. A gold frame on an easel faces the sea. The first frame is empty, the others each feature an object: a Palestinian flag that escapes its rectangle, a green landscape painting with a lemon tree (executed by two American friends), and finally the portrait of a woman with a small table next to it holding a few books; her dream is to write about "Occidentalism." The mood of the Wiggins' series is both sad and celebratory, constituting an homage to the *sumoud* (steadfastness) of the people she has come to know through the 6+ collective's project.

No one is overly optimistic about the possibility, once described by Edward Said, of mutual peace and recognition between Israel and Palestine, of acknowledgement of the other as equal—a vision of "coexistence and sharing in ways that require an innovative daring and theoretical willingness to get beyond the arid stalemate of assertion, exclusivism, and rejection."¹⁰ But the fact of this collective project, created by women artists defying national foreign policies and calling on the basic feminist values of "generosity, empathy, and reciprocity," is ultimately hopeful. *Secrets*, even when kept, grow in significance as clues to their meanings accumulate, gradually surfacing into common knowledge.



Young artists participating
in a 6+ workshop, Dheisheh
Refugee Camp, Palestine

photo by the
6+ collective

Endnotes

- 1 Nathalie Handal, excerpt from "War", quoted in *Made in Palestine*, Houston: Station Museum, May-October 2003, 23.
- 2 All quotations are from the artists in material about this project unless otherwise noted.
- 3 Jimmy Carter, *Palestine Peace not Apartheid*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- 4 Tex Kerschen, *Made in Palestine*, 17.
- 5 Quoted in Suad Amiry, "Keeping a One-Week Diary, or, Pastrami Sandwich with Concrete Wrapping," in Michael Sorkin, ed., *Against the Wall*, New York: The New Press, 87, 2005.
- 6 Michael Sorkin, in *Against the Wall*, vii.
- 7 See "Transparent Wall, Opaque Gates" by Ruchama Marton and Dalit Baum in *Against the Wall*, 212-223; the reference is to a painting of the Gilo wall by Israeli photographer Miki Kratsman.
- 8 Tex Kerschen, *Made in Palestine*, 19.
- 9 Mahmoud Darwish, quoted in *Made in Palestine*, 81.
- 10 Edward Said quoted by Sorkin, *Against the Wall*, xiv.

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THE UNEARTHING OF SECRETS

BY MAYMANAH FARHAT

Palestinian Art, 6+, and a Series of Transgressions

There is a significant movement brewing beneath the surface of the mainstream art world, one distinguished by interventionist action and the resolve to forge creative paths independent of the very establishments that attempt to monopolize (and corporatize) artistic agency. During the first half of the 20th century, this translated into influential art movements and schools that sought to reshape the function of art in the face of political conflicts and instability. The Russian Constructivist, Dada, and the Mexican Muralist were among a number of movements that transformed artistic conventions in reaction to contested or dramatically changing sociopolitical climates. These movements impacted the formalistic and conceptual aspects of art on such a profound scale that their influences are still shaping visual culture today.

The second half of the 20th century was marked with a greater visibility of art movements among artists from politically marginalized and formally colonized peoples, many of which functioned outside the narrowly defined parameters of the mainstream art world. A stronger presence of female artists was also a noticeable development of this time. Making its way into the mainstream, albeit with much difficulty, this change has worked to reshape every aspect of the international art world, from the amount and type of exposure such artists are given to the formation of new art centers and markets. Yet the art world has been slow in correcting centuries of omission, with many artists still excluded from the mainstream.

This is most evident in the case of Palestinian artists and art addressing the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Though Palestinian artists are recognized as some of the most experimental, prolific, and influential artists of the Arab world, their opportunities to exhibit are continually restricted by the political realities that have been imposed upon their communities. The constant threat of Israeli military incursions that often involve the destroying and ransacking of art exhibitions, cultural centers, schools, and the homes of artists and cultural workers is an actuality faced by both Palestinians living within the occupied territories and those living under the ever-expanding state of Israel.

Rana Bishara

Secretive Facts,

Pending Families, details (2006)

archival digital prints

Things are further complicated by the limitations that come from being required to encounter Israeli bureaucracy when traveling to or from Palestinian villages and cities. Opportunities to exhibit in other areas of the Middle East are restricted by a number of neighboring countries that refuse entry to those whose travel documents display evidence of having passed through Israeli authority. These limitations, a direct result of the Israeli occupation and the volatile history of Israeli/Arab relations, have resulted in the further punishing of a people spared no cruelty. The late renowned Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's seminal short story *Men in the Sun* (1962), in which a number of Palestinian migrant workers suffocate to death while being smuggled through the desert in search of work in Kuwait, encapsulates the astonishing state of neglect-turned-apathy that has characterized the actions of Arab regimes towards one of the world's largest displaced populations.



- Top left: view of wall, en route between Bethlehem and Ramallah
- Left of center: Qualandia checkpoint, Ramallah
- Right of center: Bethlehem checkpoint
- Far right: Bethlehem checkpoint
- photos by the 6+ collective
- The stigma that has resulted from this refusal to address the Palestinian situation has impacted Palestinian artists throughout the Arab world. Those able to travel to, or reside in, neighboring Arab countries still face limitations—economically, politically, and socially. In Jordan and Lebanon, where some of the most sizeable populations reside, many have been forced into refugee camps, granted limited political representation, few opportunities for economic stability, and slim chances of obtaining citizenship. In nearby Gulf States, where financial prospects are higher, Palestinians are forced into similar lower rings of society. Although they have comprised a considerable percentage of the workforce from which these wealthy economies thrive, Palestinians are often treated and viewed as second class residents. While modern and contemporary Palestinian art is recognized as having shaped Arab visual culture for decades, such discrimination limits the extent to which artists receive representation in art institutions, galleries, and cultural centers throughout the Middle East.
- Consequently, just as artists have established artistic communities capable of fostering creativity under the formidable conditions of the Israeli occupation, artists living outside Palestine have also taken to fashioning a transnational art scene undeterred by political and geographic peripheries. In many respects, this has freed creative expression from the limitations that come with having to produce work for a specific audience, market, or institutionalized art world.

As a people whose national borders have been shifting for over sixty years—with daily land grabs and the now encroaching 25-foot-high Israeli “security” wall—Palestinians have remained a people without a state, being shut out of their homeland in unprecedented numbers. Yet Palestine remains cemented in

the consciousness of its people. The nation is not only the physicality of land, homes, villages, and cities—it is the resilience of Palestinians and their refusal to abandon their homeland. In its current form, Palestine reaches far beyond the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea; it lies all over the world, in places such as Amman, Beirut, Paris, London, New York, San Francisco, Santiago, and Buenos Aires. Its communities, cultures, histories, and landscapes are carried with its people despite their present day locations.



While this resolve remains a critical source of inspiration, for many Palestinian artists, they are not solely defined by the subject of Palestine. On the contrary, artists have been part of a larger successive process in which art and culture have been actively shaping the modern day Palestinian experience. Although a great deal of the narratives explored in contemporary Palestinian art and visual culture are derived from the realities of post-Nakba¹ Palestine, each generation has redefined the boundaries of representation and creativity, radically reshaping the ways in which Palestinians view their individual and collective experiences. By doing so, these artists have subsequently affected how international audiences understand the Palestinian situation.

view of market in
Bethlehem, Old City

photo by the
6+ collective

In the 1920s, the Mexican Muralist movement emerged during the changing sociopolitical landscape of post-revolution Mexico. With the political zeal of the time, the school sprang from a national movement that aimed to reassert a rich cultural heritage that had experienced centuries of colonial suppression. What began in its early stages as a distinctly Mexican aesthetic soon became a movement that had a broader impact, both with its formalistic and conceptual attributes. Although to some extent the movement's prominent artists were technically inspired by European fresco painting and international developments in Modernism, Diego Rivera, Jose Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros went on to revolutionize 20th century painting. Concurrently, as their influence became rooted in the international art world, the political implications of the distinctively Mexican aesthetic began to reach far beyond their national borders, taking on universal meaning and further projecting the Mexican experience as part of a greater appeal for global political change.

Correspondingly, as contemporary Palestinian artists continue to exhibit internationally with the same determined and prolific impetus that has characterized their work for decades, their impact on international art will further underscore the fact that the Palestinian struggle coincides with international political issues the global community cannot continue to ignore.

Amidst the creative and sociopolitical contexts configuring contemporary Palestinian art, the 6+ artist collective chose to embark upon a journey that would take them not only across time zones, military check points, and red tape, but through the experiences of artists working to negotiate social, historical,

and political realities. Conceived and initiated by artists Sama Alshaibi, Wendy Babcox, Rozalinda Borcila, Mary Rachel Fanning, Yana Payusova, and Sherry Wiggins, *Secrets* was organized without a particular curatorial premise that would serve as a basis for the selection of artists and artwork. This archetypical art world method of organizing an exhibition was disregarded for a reason; *Secrets* was intended as a means through which six women, living throughout the United States, could open their collective to creative collaboration with Palestinian artists.

As a fundamental characteristic of 6+, the collective selects international locations in which members can work and exhibit with other female artists. The collective and its work is thus defined and impacted by the global domain. This quite involved act of working as an international art collective makes a bold creative statement within the larger context of the art world establishment. Simultaneously, each member offers unique perspectives and experiences in a multiplicity of mediums and representations. What unifies 6+ is the shared vision of wanting to create outlets through which uninhibited exchanges are realized to their utmost potential. Serving as an interventionist act, the collective has patterned a creative vehicle capable of breaking through the often unyielding definitions of contemporary art world practice.

Within this framework, 6+ collaborated with eight established and emerging Palestinian artists: Nadira Araj, Rana Bishara, Reem Bader, Shuruq Harb, Rula Halawani, Nathalie Handal, Faten Nastas, and Larissa Sansour. Keeping with the collective's vision of creating within an international framework, working with Palestinian artists meant that each member traveled to occupied Palestine. Three members of the collective—Sama Alshaibi, Wendy Babcox and Sherry Wiggins—exhibited at the International Center of Bethlehem in 2004 prior to initiating *Secrets* and understood, firsthand, the daily restrictions of the Israeli occupation. With the realization that their foreign passports meant greater mobility in parts of the West Bank than for most Palestinians, the collective organized *Secrets* through a number of communications and meetings with artists and cultural workers who could contribute to realizing their proposed collaborations. Consequently, the collective was able to secure the hosting of the exhibition by three separate venues in Palestine: the International Center of Bethlehem (September 2006), the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah (December 2006), and Al Hoash Gallery in Jerusalem (December 2006). This is of immense significance, given the importance of these venues within an art scene that is constantly under siege, having to survive incessant and often violent political instability.

Another imperative facet of the *Secrets* collaboration is the touring of the exhibition in the U.S., given that pro-Palestinian advocacy is perhaps one of the most politically repressed voices in the country. The strength of American/Israeli political and economic ties leaves the Palestinian narrative virtually omitted from the American consciousness. This is often extended to and typified by the art world. Artists who identify as Palestinian or as supporting the Palestinian cause face constant censorship and exclusion in the mainstream. *Made in Palestine*, a group exhibition of Palestinian artists that originated at the Station Museum in Houston, Texas (2003), toured the country solely with the efforts of grassroots organizations that fundraised and secured independent locations in California (2005), Vermont (2005), and New York (2006). After receiving continuous rejection from museums and galleries unwilling to host the exhibition

out of fear of facing controversy and the possible loss of funding, *Made in Palestine* went on to receive 2,000 attendees during its opening night at The Bridge gallery in Manhattan's Chelsea district.

There are countless examples of the difficulty, censorship, and opposition Palestinian artists face in the U.S. In light of these challenges, 6+ determined from the project's inception that the touring of *Secrets* in American venues was an essential and necessary component of their efforts with Palestinian artists. As a platform from which the Palestinian reality can be addressed, *Secrets* remains aptly titled when brought into the context of a political climate that refuses to acknowledge the dire crisis that has resulted from the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The true nature of the occupation and the daily human rights violations



executed by Israeli forces are secrets the American/Israeli stronghold attempts to maintain. By presenting *Secrets* to American audiences and facilitating the articulation of the Palestinian narrative, the collective creates an intermediary space within the American art world. As 6+ member Rozalinda Borcila affirms, the exhibition demonstrates a "series of transgressions" that attempt to depart from the "practices of cultural capital that legitimize certain discourse, visual practices, institutions and individuals."²

Conscious of the sociopolitical and cultural inferences of such desperately needed intercession, the collective has organized an exhibition whose importance lies not only in the visibility of its artists and the issues they explore, but in the exchanges and connections which resulted from traveling to Palestine and working with and in the Palestinian art scene. Recently there have been several attempts by international curators and artists to reach out to their Palestinian counterparts living under the occupation, primarily by bringing the work of non-Palestinian artists to venues throughout the territories. While these efforts are commendable, there is a missing element: a creative process that engages and supports local Palestinian artists and their communities. What might be initiated as an effort to lessen the isolation many Palestinians feel while the occupation persists and much of the world looks on, can in fact create a greater sense of exclusion.

The remarkable way in which the *Secrets* concept differs from previous exhibitions is in its genuine desire to probe and push the boundaries of how artists impact each other, their communities, the art world, and the global political sphere. By defying the limitations of imposed art world exclusionist tendencies

left:
view of the Old City,
Bethlehem

center:
6+ production meeting,
Khalil Sakakini Cultural
Center, Ramallah

right:
Naji Owdah in the
Martyr's cemetery,
Dheisheh
Refugee Camp

photos by the
6+ collective

that directly correlate with political trajectories, the exhibition demonstrates the act of reclaiming cultural agency and exemplifies a refusal to be dictated by supposed social and cultural norms. This is most evident in the extent to which 6+ members have assured that the exhibition takes place. Concerned with the welfare of the work as it travels to and from each venue, the collective has personally transported and installed the exhibition numerous times since its inception. In several instances members shared the task of assuring that the work reached its venue by traveling to the West Bank, carrying the works through check points and installing the exhibition. This sense of commitment and how it has shaped every aspect of *Secrets* is better understood through the response of 6+ member Sama Alshaibi when asked what the collective had envisioned of the exhibition:

To help each artist see the full realization of their work, to treat every member of the collective and collaborating artist with respect and dignity, and to understand all limitations and to work together to solve any and all problems. To learn more about each other through the art and the full experience. To grow. To always remember that the person is more important than the exhibition. To get the word out that Palestinians are a people who are occupied, but they are a free people inside their hearts. Their culture, art and humanity are larger than any silencing mechanisms put in their way. To not take no for an answer. To show the work in the U.S. and to try our best to make sure all of them [the collaborating artists] can come here so we can be as generous to them as they were to us. To have symposiums, workshops, lectures, events etc. to maximize the potential and reach for the work to be heard...to have a powerful exhibition and meaningful experience that all of us believe in.³

(Endnotes)

- 1 The term Nakba (catastrophe) refers to the expulsion and dispossession of hundreds of thousands Palestinians from their homes and land during the founding of Israel in 1948.
- 2 Personal communication with the artist, December 12, 2006.
- 3 Personal communication with the artist, December 31, 2006.



Children in the
village of Budrus

photo by the
6+ collective



SECRETS REVEALED

BY MAYMANAH FARHAT

Secrets: We are often asked for full disclosure. Imperatives of communication, of media or commerce are based on the need to make visible, to reveal. But often it is that which remains hidden, unspoken and unknowable which defines our experience. A secret can be private, or a shared knowledge. It can be a protective veil or an impossible burden. It can empower or destroy. A secret is an active withdrawal, yearning at once to remain hidden and to be revealed.

- from the *Secrets* exhibition curatorial statement

Both in private and public domains, even things that are spoken often remain concealed. As eloquently stated above by the 6+ collective, there is a sense of “yearning at once to remain hidden and to be revealed” when secrets remain closely guarded. Collective member Sherry Wiggins notes that there are multiple meanings and interpretations that can be extracted from a secret. The multimedia works featured in *Secrets* bring to light a number of individual and collective experiences, all investigating and articulating how the seemingly invisible affects our daily lives.

Reem Bader
Stills from *Turning 40*, (2006)
single-channel video

Larissa Sansour

Using subversive humor and poignant political satire, Larissa Sansour confronts and undermines notions of power and political license. In her video work *Happy Days* (2006), Sansour combines a popular 1970s American sitcom theme song with rapidly edited scenes of the occupied territories. Set in the 1950s, the sitcom glorified what many Americans still view as a time of prosperity, regeneration, and a return to normality. Yet as many settled into suburban life and benefited from an economic boom, underlining issues of civil rights, nuclear testing, arms stockpiling, and the emergence of the Cold War hovered over the collective American psyche. This sociopolitical paradox manifested itself into every aspect of 1950s American culture. For viewers unfamiliar with the *Happy Days* theme song, the upbeat tempo and lyrics are carefree and catchy. The video begins with a disclaimer that reads, "The following video is shot entirely on location in the occupied territories. Any resemblance to real people or events is fully intentional." The viewer is then thrust into a world where Sansour repeatedly draws attention to the imbalances in power, privilege, and armed force that maintain the Israeli occupation.

Shots of military towers, a number of checkpoints, the vastness of The Wall,⁴ and the endless presence of Israeli soldiers are interspersed between shots of Palestinian civilians. The video shows landscapes interrupted by Israeli settlement track-housing. Remnants of destroyed homes provide evidence of former Palestinian villages. Smiling soldiers are filmed posing for tourists' photographs in Jerusalem. A child is shown approaching, then backing away from, a checkpoint. Young soldiers joke as though boys in a school yard while they guard a small civilian passageway in The Wall. Throughout the film, Sansour plays the role of a bubbly youth, yet what remains painstakingly visible is that the occupation affects every aspect of the Palestinian existence.

Like 1950s America, which seemingly reveled in the post-war economic boom (having just fought "the good war") while lynching, segregation, and political marginalization remained a reality for American people of color, *Happy Days* exposes a state desperately trying to suppress any evidence of entrenched violence and political conflict. Consequently, the global community is also implicated since Sansour's short is intended as a direct commentary on how the lines of entertainment and news are becoming increasingly indiscernible, while apathy towards international conflicts grows.



Larissa Sansour
Stills from *Happy Days*,
(2006) single-channel
video



Larissa Sansour
Stills from *Happy Days*, (2006)
single-channel video

Rozalinda Borcila

Disclosure (2006), a video work by Rozalinda Borcila that incorporates text and sound, deconstructs how multiple and often opposing representations of that which is ostensibly unknown are formed through a fluctuating political vantage. Borcila describes the inspiration for *Disclosure* by providing the historical context that has led to a developing trend in western understandings of Eastern Europe:

In 1990, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the revolution in Romania, American-published tourist guidebooks began describing Eastern Europe as a land full of mystery and dark secrets—which the would-be Western tourist/adventurer could discover. This “exotic” place is defined, paradoxically, both through its extreme secrecy and through its sudden availability for penetration.

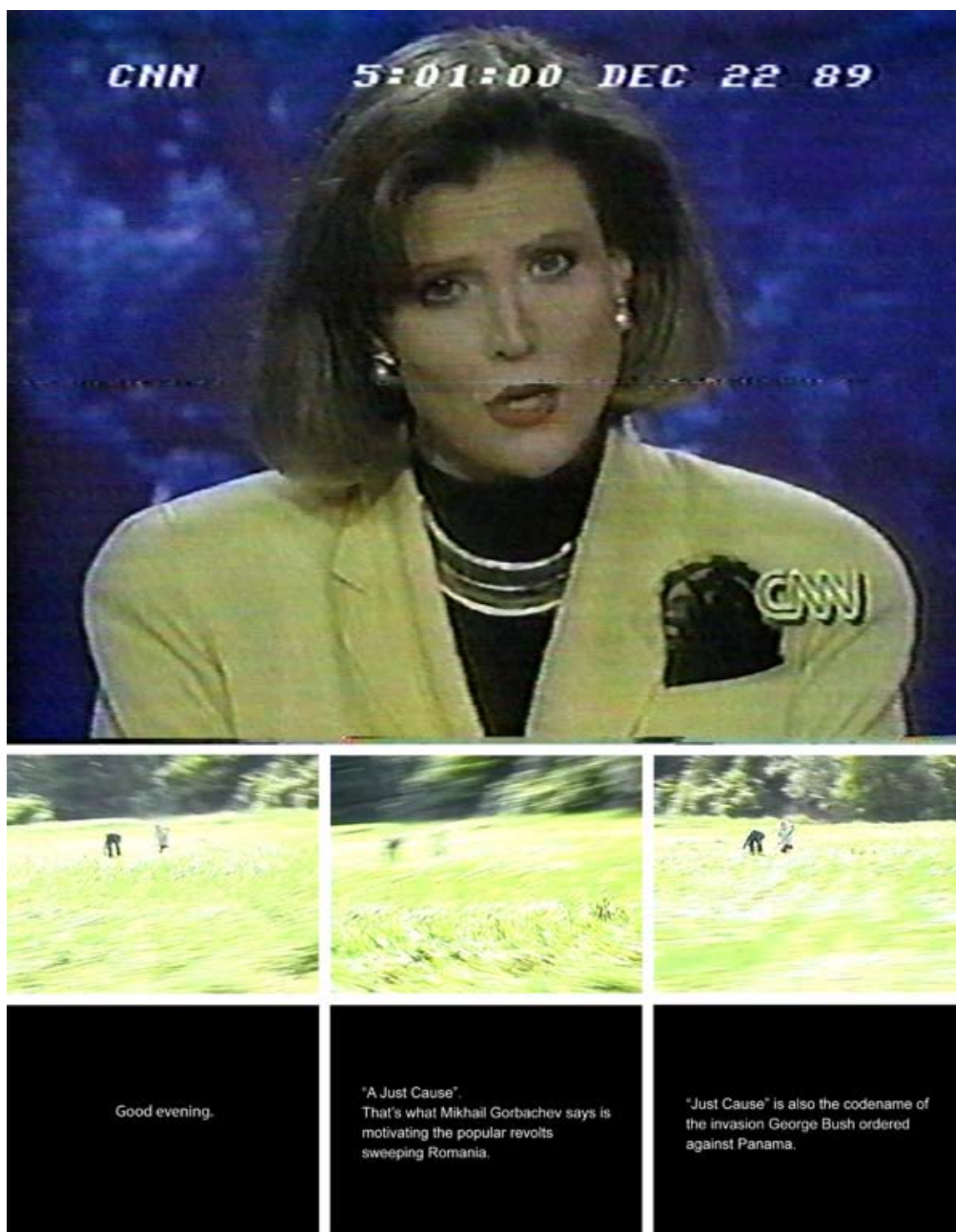
In a number of vignettes, the artist references the “exotic” representations that have formed surrounding this “discovery” of the region by Western political and economic interests. Night vision goggles insinuate clandestine surveillance as figures are shown participating in ordinary recreational activities. A farming couple comes in and out of focus as they are engulfed in the movement of fields that seem to rotate around them.



Transfixed in a landscape that transforms rapidly, the couple appears unable to move and is caught in a moment in time. Several scenes are looped with texts that describe stereotypical representations. The scene in which fields encircle two figures is coupled with a reference to the tale of *Sleeping Beauty*, in which the main character “does not change” and “is cast outside history.” Travel brochure-like descriptions invite the viewer to a land “preserved in medieval isolation.”

Rozalinda Borcila
Stills from *Disclosure*,
(2006) single-channel
video

Since the tourist market has at all times been an extension of economically exploitative policies, the notion of availability that Borcila describes is subsequently achieved through this industry and with the act of presenting Eastern Europe as “other.” This designation implies that the region somehow lies in contrast to a Western frame of reference, therefore separate from the Western self. Once detached and seen as inferior, the region and its people are regarded or disregarded and are malleable for the needs of the dominant political power.



Rozalinda Borcila
Stills from *Disclosure*, (2006)
single-channel video

Mary Rachel Fanning

Mary Rachel Fanning's audio/visual installation *My Last Duchess* (2006) examines the formation of narratives as they are told and concealed through an intensified political climate. The lives of Fanning's grandparents during World War II are presented as the basis for what becomes a telling investigation into how a nation, both in its official and civilian realms, attempts to function in a forged state of normality. Through a series of

letters, photographs, recordings, news clippings, war propaganda, and radio broadcasts, Fanning attempts to piece together fragments of a four-year period of her familial history in which war and political volatility determined every aspect of civilian life.



The viewer is presented with a number of recordings; two sets of headphones contain Fanning reading either her grandfather Vance's letters or those of her grandmother Mary Belle. The headphones are placed on both sides of a table, on top of which are scanned reproductions of the letters Fanning has carefully copied (even the original fold markings made by her grandparents appear on the facsimiles). The private and domestic domains are insinuated with a table and lamps, capturing the intimacy of letters between a separated husband and wife. Audio feeds allow the viewer to place themselves directly in the thoughts of two people trying to join a fragmented life whose destiny remains out of their control. An audio track broadcast in the installation space features a compilation of Fanning and her grandfather reciting Robert Browning's



poem *My Last Duchess*, 1940s recordings created by the married couple as correspondences, Fanning's recorded phone interviews with Vance and Mary Belle, and period news announcements.

Top:
Mary Rachel Fanning
My Last Duchess
(2006)
detail, mixed media
installation

Bottom:
Mary Rachel Fanning
My Last Duchess
detail (2006)

As the viewer becomes immersed in Fanning's merging of history and personal narrative, one becomes aware of the artist's interest in how individuals seek to define their experiences in both the present and past. In one letter, Vance describes arriving at a military base in Puerto Rico, but mentions to his wife that it is a trip he wishes, having just been married, could have been for their honeymoon. In another Mary Belle describes the daily happenings at home—baking a cake and visiting friends. Despite how each attempts to engage the other in the ordinary events of their lives, it becomes apparent that their thoughts are filled with worry and anxiety over the other's well-being during this forced time of separation. The immediate danger of Vance's time away at war is a reoccurring concern that the couple discusses and attempts to suppress. In a statement accompanying the work, Fanning asks, "How do both private and public messages interact and determine what is culturally acceptable and moral?" With *My Last Duchess* she establishes that there is inevitably more to history and collective consciousness than is presented on the surface.

Tuesday 8th

*At home in the
basement*

My Darling,

This is the day - only I think it isn't. I am feeling fine - but not too good. You know what I mean - not to the scrubbing stage. But I have made a chocolate cake (to use up some sour milk) and some custard for Gram this morning. Em is putting on the frosting right now. It was a new recipe and I put the whole mess of dough into one pan. It happened to be a huge amount and since I was so dumb I hadn't realized that, I had a fine job of cleaning up the oven. But the house has aired out considerably - what a time.

Dad and Em have come into the house and are "at home", really. They brought two fans and are sleeping in the basement. So we can all be comfortable. Last night we saw the Johnsons, but Em plans to do most of her visiting while I'm "indisposed". Tonight I'm going to Toby Blandings for dinner. She still has the little house that she and Bill rented from a vacationing couple for the ten days Bill was here on furlough. She's having Gail and I - a celebration for Little Archer, sort of. I think it will be fun for all of us - and I rather think it would be alright if I could have a "hospital call" from there.

On the other hand, I'm hoping this affair can wait until we hear good or bad from you, Vance. We know there is trouble somewhere - it could be a jillion things, of course. But I would like our news to come before the baby - that would be best for all of us. None of us can get much worried about you - I have a strange

Yana Payusova

In a series of Fuji Crystal Archival prints titled "*I remember, you remember...*" (2005-2006), Yana Payusova examines the ways in which our perceptions evolve and give way to the various stages of life. Drawn into the whimsical depictions of the artist's childhood, the viewer is urged to contemplate how the mind retells the past. The series visually combines time, space, memory, and imagination in an attempt to recreate the sensations and observations that shaped Payusova's childhood. The artist examines the manner in which one constructs an awareness of self through the intersections of consciousness and recollection.



Family photographs provide the foundation for the artist's exploration. Through the documentation of moments, she searches for that which may have been concealed with age. Each print contains a childhood photograph from which Payusova's story is told. Using details from these images as cues, the artist summons what she describes as the "five-year-old version" of herself.



Bringing to mind early Italian Renaissance painting in which a narrative is depicted as several moments in time overlapping compositionally to occupy a number of visual planes, each print contains various illustrations of memories. A picture of the artist with her father and brother, for example, presents a starting point for the uncovering of what it felt like to have the flu as a child. In the print titled *The Flu*, multiple moments, along with the emotions they elicited at the time, are portrayed in vivid and expressive illustrations. Payusova and her sibling are shown ill in bed while their father appears animated nearby; the fairytales he recounts for his children are visually incorporated throughout the composition. In another portion of the print, the children are shown bedridden, their faces flushed with fever as they attempt to amuse each other at different times, yet they appear content to be in each other's company.

Top:
Yana Payusova
"*I remember, you remember...*,"
Birth Right, (2006)
gouache & archival
print on canvas

Bottom:
Yana Payusova
"*I remember, you remember...*,"
The Flu, (2006)
gouache & archival
print on canvas

Acting as a visual stream of consciousness, the series provides an organic construction of narrative in which the immediate sensations involved in the process of shaping memories are extracted, reexamined, and placed within a new, perhaps more complete, recounting of biography.



Yana Payusova
"I remember, you remember..."
Big Sister, (2006)
gouache & archival
print on canvas

Sama Alshaibi

In Sama Alshaibi's photographic series *"In This Garden"* (2006), a multigenerational narrative unfolds as the viewer is taken through the wishes of the artist's late Palestinian grandfather. Having died in Baghdad in 1983, his hopes to be reunited with his children who escaped to Jordan and the U.S. were unfulfilled, as were his hopes for peace and stability in Palestine and Iraq. Forced to leave with the onset of the Israeli occupation, his wish to be buried near his mother and sister in their village was also left unrealized. Combining photography and text, Alshaibi documents a familial journey to the occupied territories where she and her cousins pay tribute to their grandfather.

In each photograph, the artist's three cousins are shown honoring his legacy. Beneath their images, she describes their return to Palestine, a deeply personal account of a people forced to negotiate life's junctures amidst displacement, political uncertainty, and a fragmented community.

In *Rotten Fruit*, Alshaibi's female subjects are shown sitting on stone steps holding fruit and flowers, presumably in the village of their grandfather. Suggestive of the garden he had hoped to cultivate once returning to Palestine, the three women present offerings in his memory. Using a literal and visual play on words, the title of the photograph refers to their encountering of a number of social, cultural, and political obstacles. Regardless of these experiences, the three women sit proudly before the viewer, their piercing gazes communicating defiant poise.

Sama Alshaibi
"In This Garden,"
Love Affair, (2006)
 archival digital print



Alshaibi's confident figures not only express a sense of fortitude—they recall a distinct imagery found in post-Nakba Palestinian art and visual culture in which portrayals of women are iconic signifiers of a people's tenacity. In paintings and illustrations by influential Palestinian artists Suleiman Mansour, Ismail Shammout, and Abdul Rahman al Muzayen, the female image is depicted as the embodiment of *sumoud*.⁵ Today we find a new generation of artists continuing and reinventing this tradition in a multitude of mediums.



From each direction someone yelled at us - the Israeli soldiers, the Arab men - their mother (my khala). Our skirts weren't long enough, Samia was wearing jeans, Gene's hijab was falling off, Nour was having her period, but she insisted on praying. We came to pray, our only chance at the Dome of the Rock. "Allah doesn't accept the prayers of young women..." she whispered. I wouldn't hear the rest.

Sama Alshaibi
"In This Garden,"
Rotten Fruit, (2006)
 archival digital print

Nadira Araj

Although minimalist in style, Nadira Araj's *Talk Through the Sand* (2006) is a gripping allegory of the Palestinian existence. In Araj's short film, the viewer is taken into a church with a methodical shot of the floor as the camera travels through its stone corridors. This initial shot requires patience, but emphasizes a walk that the artist describes as one taken by thousands of visitors wanting to share their desires for "something that seems impossible to achieve." An audio track of choir music solidifies the viewer's feeling of entering a place of worship. A pensive frame of mind is suggested as the camera glides past ancient columns.

The scene then arrives at a large candle holder in which tall thin candles stand lit in sand. As the camera remains fixed, the hands of worshipers lighting candles come into view, each in hope of their prayers being granted. Several more candles are lit until the holder is practically full, their stems radiating as they remain illuminated in what is otherwise a dark corner of the church. Suddenly the hands of an individual hidden from view begin to remove the candles one by one, then several at a time. The film ends with a shot of the candles being put out then discarded, implying that at any second hopes and desires can be eliminated. Although the fulfillment of these prayers remains out of their control, worshipers continue to return in order to perform the same act of utterance.



Nadira Araj
Stills from *Talk Through the Sand*, (2006) single-channel video



Nadira Araj
Stills from *Talk Through the Sand*,
(2006) single-channel video

Sherry Wiggins

As part of what she describes as her “ongoing process of learning about the situation in the occupied territories of Palestine,” Sherry Wiggins uses performance and photography to reflect the dreams of those living under the Israeli occupation. After realizing how little Americans know about the conflict, Wiggins initiated a dialogue between friends she had made during trips to the occupied territories and her friends and family in the U.S. Acting as a messenger of sorts, the artist began the process by asking those in the U.S., “If you had the opportunity to talk informally with people in the West Bank, what questions would you have for them? What would you like to know?” Based on these interviews, Wiggins then asked several individuals in the West Bank, “What is your dream, and what is your idea of paradise?”

Upon returning to the U.S., Wiggins performed a meditative ceremony in which the essences of several dreams were symbolically recreated. By setting an empty frame on an easel near the ocean, the artist provided a metaphoric blank canvas onto which these dreams could be projected. Representational objects and images were then placed in the frame and photographed. Thus, “*Sounds of the Ocean*” (2006) is a series in which the unrequited hopes of Palestinians living under the occupation are personified. For many Americans the desires expressed in Wiggins’ series are easily obtainable. Yet to hear the sounds of the ocean or to have the freedom to travel and study are desires that will most likely never materialize for those unable to leave many areas of Palestine. Upon examination of each photograph it becomes gradually more apparent that the artist’s ritual speaks of lives interrupted, as individual and collective aspirations are suspended.



Top left:
Sherry Wiggins
“*Sound of the Ocean*,”
Lemon Tree for Suhair, (2006)
archival digital print



Top Right:
“*Sound of the Ocean*,”
Freedom for Taghrid, (2006)
archival digital print



Top:
Sherry Wiggins
"Sound of the Ocean,"
Dreams for Palestine, (2006)
archival digital print

Bottom:
"Sound of the Ocean,"
Peace for Joseph, (2006)
archival digital print

Shuruq Harb

In a photographic series titled *Traces of Honor* (2006), Shuruq Harb examines the establishment of supposed cultural norms and its direct correlation to the distribution of power. Prompted by three “honor” killings in 2005 in her West Bank hometown of Ramallah, the artist reconstructed traces of bodies beneath soil using manmade objects such as metal wire. Harb then photographed these emblematic corpses. In spite of their burial, her subjects allude to corporeal presences, suggesting that the spirits of these victims are difficult to dismiss. The images are evocative and ghostly, possessing an imminent sorrow. In each photograph light catches on the found objects, indicating the existence of bodies, so that at all times the viewer is reminded of their presence.

This looming reminder is further cemented in the viewer’s thoughts as it is disclosed that the artist created *Traces of Honor* in reaction to violent crimes that were intended to implement what is considered moral and immoral within her community. What was extracted from the circumstances surrounding these murders was the elocution of punishment, thus the lives of the female victims were not celebrated, nor were they mourned in a manner similar to others. Yet the artist fixes the memories of these women in the imagination of the viewer, insisting that their lives and deaths not be ignored. With these presences recreated and their memories emphasized, notions of morality and dishonor are deflected. Thus the sociopolitical factors that have led to the socialization of Harb’s community through violence can be critically examined.



Shuruq Harb
Traces of Honor, (2006)
archival digital prints



Shuruq Harb
Traces of Honor, (2006)
archival digital print

Rula Halawani

The photographs comprising Rula Halawani's series "*The Wall*" (2006) can be viewed, in part, as documentation. Yet what is compelling about the series is the detailed recording of the occupation, the unseen physical and psychological effects on those witnessing the incessant ravaging of their land.

Black and white somber and atmospheric images confront The Wall's colossal presence. The sky appears overcast just beyond the outline of the structure. Remnants of Palestinian land are suggested with the stripped, desolate, and murky earth that appears in the foreground of each photograph. For those familiar with the conditions of the occupation, the solid concrete columns that make up the structure perhaps attest to a militarized reality, as though soldiers forming a blockade. To viewers unaware of the brutal consequences of The Wall's construction, the massive body might allude to an industrial landscape or a



prison wall. Regardless of what is evoked upon viewing Halawani's images, invariably a claustrophobic, imposing presence dominates the viewer's gaze. Halawani's photographs have an unsettling effect as every angle of her observation is severed by the vastness of an infinite-seeming gray abjection.

In a catalog essay written by art critic Kaelen Wilson-Goldie accompanying a recent group exhibition titled *The Wall & the Check Points*, Halawani explains:

Rula Halawani
The Wall, (2006)
archival digital print

Each photograph symbolizes what the years of Israeli occupation have done to my land: The standing stone symbolizes the tombs of the dead, those I have seen killed by the Israeli army. The water symbolizes all the water that was stolen from the West Bank by Israel. The ugly shadow reflected on the wall symbolizes the monster of the settlements that casts a shadow over our lives. And finally, the emptiness in my photographs symbolizes Israel's continuing attempt to erase Palestinian society which began in 1948 and continues to this day.⁶

The building of The Wall, as it encloses and splinters Palestinian villages, has been documented by countless international artists, filmmakers, and photojournalists since its construction began in 2002. However, the most profound visual pronouncements have been by those living beneath its ominous presence. Unmatched in its callous tactics of land-grabbing and suffocating of the Palestinian people, The Wall has subsequently become the quintessential representation of the Israeli occupation.



Rula Halawani
The Wall, (2006)
archival digital print

Faten Nastas

Faten Nastas' audio-video installation work, *Transfiguration* (2006) combines poetry, music, and photography to convey the tragic story of a young man whose life was taken under the occupation. Having lived in Bethlehem prior to his assassination, images of Daniel Abu Hamameh's life are flashed before the viewer through a wooden box that hangs on the wall of the exhibition space. The viewer is encouraged to look through the eyes of the box's mask-like mold. While these images are shown, an audio feed provides the artist's recitation of excerpts from poems by acclaimed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish and renowned Lebanese literary figure Khalil Gibran, which are set to music by Turkish musician Omar Faruk Tekbilek.



Photographs of Hamameh depict several moments of his short life. From his baptism as an infant to his graduation as a teenager, these images present a life of an ordinary child as he proceeds through various cultural and social rites. Interlaced with the biography of this young man are photographs of The Wall as it cuts and weaves through Bethlehem. Large watchtowers peer into homes in parts of the town that are enclosed into a virtual prison. In the end, the story of one Bethlehem resident signifies generations of Palestinians forced to confront the explosive nature of the conflict day after day. With The Wall impinging on the West Bank, young men and women are left with increasingly dismal futures.



As more images are shown it becomes apparent that a dramatic change occurred as Hamameh entered adulthood. It appears he became a resistance fighter shortly before he was killed, and is remembered as a martyr in his community. Here it is important to note that in Palestine, anyone killed as a result of the occupation

is considered a martyr since it is understood that remaining in the territories, despite the danger it poses, is an act of political defiance and a sacrifice made on behalf of the entire community.

Faten Nastas
Transfiguration
(2006)
stills from mixed
media installation

The sudden break in music as images of his funeral are shown, reminds the viewer that Nastas' subject was born into an environment where a normal childhood is impossible. Posters commemorating his martyrdom are shown in a Bethlehem neighborhood, a commanding form of imagery that has become part of post-Nakba visual culture and can be seen in public spaces of villages and towns throughout Palestine.



Faten Nastas
Transfiguration
(2006)
still from mixed
media installation

Rana Bishara

Rana Bishara approaches the occupation from another vantage point. Living and working in a village near the Lebanese border, Bishara is part of a large population of Palestinians who are under Israeli jurisdiction as Israeli citizens or “permanent residents.” In *Secretive Facts, Pending Families* (2006), the artist details the adversity faced by Palestinians living on the Israeli side of the Wall, as families and communities are further separated by its construction. Each year Israeli laws shut out greater numbers of Palestinians from their homes and villages. Accessibility to Palestinian towns and cities continues to diminish as Palestinians living in the occupied territories, under the Israeli state, and in diaspora are increasingly refused entry by Israeli authorities.



In several photographs, Bishara documents the living conditions of a woman and her children who reside illegally in an abandoned unfinished building in East Jerusalem. Separated from her husband who is not allowed to leave the West Bank, the mother is forced to raise her children alone. The family also experiences the difficulties of finding housing, undoubtedly due to the economic and political marginalization of Palestinians living under Israeli governance. Bishara’s photographs show a dark cavernous space in which the only signs of domesticity are the few belongings the family has strewn throughout the area they have made their home. Makeshift rooms are made from large pieces of plastic, cloth, and metal panes. Light is scarce, as few windows reveal the outside world to this hidden domain. Figures appear in a number of these images, yet the physicality of their being is overpowered in the shadows of the hollowed building, a powerful and lingering reminder of the attempts at the near erasure of Palestinians.

Rana Bishara
Secretive Facts,
Pending Families
 (2006)
 archival digital prints

The denial of citizenship or legal identification to Palestinians works to conceal evidence of the considerable population that remains within the borders of pre-1948 Palestine. Consequently, Bishara’s work discloses a side of Israeli society that is rarely seen, a world of secret lives where Palestinians are forced to live divided from their families and communities, only to face the socioeconomic hardships that come with obtaining the “privileges” of being a so-called “Arab-Israeli.” Drawing attention to the circumstances faced by those staying on “the ‘free’ side of the divide,”⁷ *Secretive Facts, Pending Families* confirms that the occupation exists on both sides of The Wall.



Rana Bishara
*Secretive Facts,
Pending Families*
(2006)
archival digital print

Reem Bader

In her video work *Turning 40* (2006), Reem Bader grapples with what she describes as a “personal fear/journey” that comes with growing older. Placing herself before the camera, a rare occurrence for this multimedia artist, she describes a heightened sense of self-awareness as she approaches her fortieth birthday. Making her innermost thoughts accessible to the viewer, Bader voices her apprehensions about age and the physical and emotional changes that occur to women as they pass certain stages of their lives. These changes are also discussed in a social context—how Bader views the elderly; how they are viewed in society; what age implies in assessing one’s life; what one is expected to accomplish by a certain age; how our priorities change as we become older. This is extended to notions of femininity and what is regarded as the proper course of a woman’s life.

Throughout the film, the artist sits upright and speaks directly into the camera, allowing the viewer to be engaged in the piece almost as a second party in an intimate conversation. Bader sits surrounded by chairs, daytime light illuminates her figure, as though we are brought into her home and entrusted with her private thoughts and concerns. She expresses no signs of vulnerability, despite discussing the stress and fear of realizing that we are trapped in our bodies, which eventually grow old and tired.

Interspersed with this footage are shots of Bader walking barefoot in the desert, her legs the only parts of her body visible to the viewer. The movement as she walks in sand alternates directions, implying a disoriented state and reinforcing the tension and reservations she has about aging. Bader describes the outlines of her footsteps pressed into the sand as “one’s desire for a trace after he/she’s gone.” Though poised in her candid discussion, the artist appears anxious as she digresses into a number of issues concerning women over forty. In the end what becomes clear is that *Turning 40* is not simply about age, but about that which remains unspoken for many. Bader’s work demonstrates a woman trying to comprehend her place in the world, what she feels she has accomplished in life, and what impression will resonate after she is gone.



Reem Bader
Stills from *Turning 40*, (2006)
single-channel video



Reem Bader
Stills from *Turning 40*, (2006)
single-channel video

Wendy Babcox

In a series of directorial style photographs, Wendy Babcox examines the secret lives of preadolescent girls through the sensations and transformations that come with the onset of puberty. The artist describes *Secret Agendas* (2006) as referencing “the secret yearnings of a young woman as she feels the flutter of a shift in her body and psychology...the heightened sense of anguish and pleasure, the intensity and excruciating flood of emotion associated with the onset of puberty.”

The viewer witnesses the affect of these changes in the ways in which Babcox’s protagonists situate themselves before her directorial gaze. Awkward and seemingly uncomfortable, their commands of their bodies appear unsure. In each photograph a portrait of young girl is presented to the viewer, yet the subject’s thoughts and emotions remain concealed. Covering their faces are brightly colored wrestling masks. Normally associated with overtly masculine, testosterone-driven performance, the masks seem out of place at first glance. How can such imagery evoke the beginnings of an emergence into womanhood? Yet the lively masks provide the perfect illustration of the contradicting emotions that form as biological changes become apparent. These rapid and dramatic changes are often masked by a young girl as she learns to negotiate a developing identity in a society where her gender is prescribed with a long list of social and cultural implications.

The “masculine” connotations of the masks test supposed social norms, challenging the designation and imposition of gender roles at any age. In this regard, Babcox’s subjects repeal what defines our understandings of femininity or masculinity. By hiding behind a symbol that implies the act of executing a contrary gendered performance, the young girl takes on an anonymous role that enables her to confront these changes in public on her own terms.



Wendy Babcox
Secret Agendas, (2006)
archival digital prints



Wendy Babcox
Secret Agendas, (2006)
archival digital print

Nathalie Handal

Nathalie Handal's *Secret* (2006) takes an interactive approach to the exploration of what remains hidden and concealed. "Does truth exist or are we perpetually entangled in secrets and/or undisclosed information?", Handal asks in an accompanying artist's statement. Prompting viewers to entrust her with that which is unspoken, a postcard is provided for the recording of their secrets which is then placed in a large Plexiglas box. This act of disclosing what is kept guarded draws the viewer into a semi-private space in very public surroundings, making the declaration of individual secrets a shared experience. At the end of the tour of the exhibition, the secrets left by viewers will provide inspiration for a poem.

Recognized for her contributions as a poet, Handal's participation in the exhibition adds another dimension to facilitating the articulation of the Palestinian narrative. As seen in the use of music and poetry in Faten Nastas' *Transfiguration*, there is a longstanding tradition of the merging of disciplines in Palestinian culture. Palestinian literary, theatre, musical, and visual arts have overlapped throughout the modern period. With the Nakba defining much of recent Palestinian history, the self-determined political movement has traversed through various branches of contemporary Palestinian culture, assuring that no aspect of this narrative is left untold. Handal's collaboration with the 6+ collective and fellow Palestinian artists distinguishes the interweaving of art, culture, and collective experience that has helped to carry the Palestinian struggle.



Nathalie Handal
Secret, (2006)
 details, mixed media
 installation



Nathalie Handal
Secret, (2006)
 mixed media installation

Secrets in America

Whether deconstructing the ways in which a community addresses the concept of morality, the excavation of memory, or the connections between power and sociopolitical agency, the artwork featured in the exhibition contributes to an ongoing discussion of the role of art in today's global society.

What is equally telling in relation to *Secrets* is that the artists individually determined the sociopolitical frameworks surrounding their work. Since the majority of the artworks were produced after artists were invited to collaborate with the collective, each artist was free to interpret, and in turn, contribute to, the conceptualization of the exhibition. This is perhaps the most striking aspect of the *Secrets* project, since curators frequently act as gatekeepers of information, serving as intermediaries between artists, their work, and audiences. The elemental structuring of an exhibition, why and how audiences will view an artist's work, is allocated to this role, invariably funneling the exchange of ideas through a process of subjectivity. As this process is a mere composite of greater art world methodology, we often come to understand artists individually and collectively through these encoded lenses. In the case of *Secrets*, this predetermination of spectatorial process was bypassed, leaving the aesthetic experience in its simplest form, from artist to viewer. By disregarding the purported need for curatorship, 6+ allotted equal authorship to all fourteen of the exhibition's artists.

This facet is not only critical to the exhibiting of contemporary Palestinian art in the U.S., but it is also equally important to consider in regards to the broader prototypical methods of representation and classification employed by the American art world. It is no coincidence that the members of 6+ are women from various cultural backgrounds who are determined to explore creative relationships outside the bounds of the mainstream. The dominant American art scene is wrought with bias, as artists are categorized and ranked, and their work then regarded accordingly, based on narrowly defined notions of what is deemed as "contributing to the progression of art." Although often left unquestioned, this rigidly defined system is directly tied to the American political sphere, a factor that subsequently impacts what is considered in art historical discourse, the market, and institutions. Hence, artists continue to be included or excluded based on class, race, and gender. Considering then the sociopolitical milieu in which the project was founded, *Secrets* takes on new meaning as it is presented to American audiences. The momentum which navigated the 6+ collective through the challenges of international borders, a military occupation, and a 25-foot wall, will now forge through the ideological barriers of the American consciousness and the mainstream art world.

Endnotes

- 4 The term “The Wall” will be used to refer to the 25 foot high, over 400 miles-long, barrier system that is being built around and through the West Bank.
- 5 *sumoud* (steadfastness) is an Arabic term that is used to refer to the unwavering self-determination of Palestinians.
- 6 Wilson-Goldie, Kaelen. 2006. “Representing Palestine: Forms of Closure, Documentary Traces, and the Art of Breaking through Barriers.” *The Wall & the Check Points* exhibition catalog, Darat al Funun: Amman.
- 7 Rana Bishara, artist’s statement 2006.



6+ transporting artwork
at the Qualandia
checkpoint,
Ramallah

photo by the
6+ collective

Maymanah Farhat specializes in modern and contemporary Arab art. Farhat has conducted extensive research in Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. She has lectured on Middle Eastern visual culture in universities, galleries and non-profit organizations throughout the United States. Her published works include art historical writings, exhibitions reviews, artist profiles, film reviews, and political essays. Since 2006, she has been co-editor of Art AsiaPacific magazine’s annual Almanac, which reports on the year in art in 67 Asian nations. Farhat has curated several exhibitions, including Three Arab Painters in New York, which was held at The Bridge gallery in Manhattan’s Chelsea

COLLABORATOR BIOGRAPHIES

Sama Alshaibi (b. 1973, Basra, Iraq) received her MFA from the University of Colorado. She is currently Assistant Professor of Photography at the University of Arizona. Her photography, video and performances negotiate the shifts between personal, familial, and official history, creating a human context to the wars and exiles from her homelands of Iraq and historical Palestine. Recent exhibitions and screenings include The University Gallery (Stellenbosch, South Africa), The Museum of Contemporary Art (Denver, CO) and Mizna Annual Arab Film Festival.

Nadira Araj (b. 1959, Bethlehem, Palestine) received her MA in Computer Science and Management Information Systems from Syracuse University in 1989. Araj currently works as a lecturer at Bethlehem University. Her sculptural work incorporates an intuitive response to found objects in an occupied land. Her artistic practice is guided by a desire to escape the stressful surrounding environment and cultivate the pleasure of creativity. She participated in an exhibition at The International Center of Bethlehem, entitled *Land, Peoples and Identities* (2005).

Wendy Babcox (b. 1963, Windsor, United Kingdom) received her MFA from the University of Florida. She is currently Assistant Professor of Photography at the University of South Florida. Babcox's work looks largely at the visual politics of women's laughter and female transgression. Her photography, video, and performance, often engage notions of the carnivalesque, vaudeville-style performance, surveillance, masquerade, and the role of the tourist, in contemporary culture. Recent exhibitions/performances include Miami Beach Cinematheque and Transmodern Festival, Baltimore.

Reem Bader (b. 1966, Ramallah, Palestine) received her MFA with distinction in International Practice from the University College for the Creative Arts, UK, in 2005. She lives in Amman, Jordan and works at the Royal Film Commission. Her creative work directly addresses the Palestinian hardships due to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land. She explores global concepts of displacement and dislocation through video and other media. Recent exhibitions include *Coding: Decoding* at the Nikola Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen, Denmark. She was also featured in the Jordan Short Film Festival (2006).

Rana Bishara (b. 1971, Tarsheha, Palestine) received her MFA at the Savannah College of Art and Design on a Fulbright Scholarship. Of her work she states, "I collect and recall from my own personal political iconography, and translate it into a public symbol. This is how the personal becomes political." Her work has been included in many international exhibitions including *Made in Palestine* at the Station Art Museum, Houston, TX (2003) and at The Bridge, Chelsea, NY (2006).

Rozalinda Borcila (b. 1971, Cluj-Napoca, Romania) received her MFA in Sculpture at Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI. She is currently Associate Professor at the University of South Florida. Her video, installation, and performance work, attends to the material spaces of power and its subjective experience in daily life. She collaborates in BLW (with Sarah Lewison and Julie Wyman), exploring the power of speech in a culture where oral competence is displaced by media forms.

Mary Rachel Fanning (b. 1978, Alabama, USA) received her MFA in Photography and Electronic Media from the University of Colorado. Fanning currently resides in Chicago where she is an advisor and photography instructor at Columbia College. Fanning's influences and motivations are derived from her upbringing: "Raised by a pair of progressive educators in the Deep South, I am fascinated with people's stories, both public and private. Often my cultural interactions encounter the sharp edges of economics, race, age, social change, and the 'American Dream.'"

Rula Halawani (b. 1964, E. Jerusalem, Palestine) worked for Reuters as an award winning photojournalist from 1995-99. Halawani received her MA in Photographic Studies from the University of Westminster, London, UK. Her recent work has documented with photography the establishment of the separation walls. She went on to found the Photography Department at Birzeit University in 2001. Her exhibitions include *Negative Incursion* (Art Car Museum, USA, 2003) the Fotografie Forum International, Frankfurt, Germany (2004), and the 7th Sharjah Biennial, Sharjah, UAE (2005).

Nathalie Handal (b. 1969, Bethlehem, Palestine) finished her postgraduate studies in English and Drama at the University of London, and her MFA in Creative Writing at Bennington College. She has been involved either as a writer, director, or producer, in over 20 productions worldwide. She is the author of two poetry CDs and two poetry books (*The NeverField* and *The Lives of Rain*), and is the editor of *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*.

Shuruq Harb (b. 1980, Ramallah, Palestine) received her MA in Photographic Studies from the University of Westminster, London, UK, and a BA in Philosophy at Earlham College, IN, USA. Harb uses photography to reconstruct rather than document reality. Her photographs are imaginary interpretations that re-stage reality in a style that is both surreal and intimate. She participated in the 2004 International Book-Faire, Arab Photographers Exhibition in Frankfurt, Germany (2004) and the UNICEF's Palestinian Women Photographers' Exhibition in Palestine (2005).

Faten Nastas (b. 1975, Beit-Jala, Palestine) received her BFA from the Bezalel Academy for Fine Art & Design in Jerusalem. She is Chair of the Arts and Crafts Department at Dar al-Kalima College in Bethlehem. Past works have incorporated Arabic and English pop songs, dear diary pages, mass-produced posters of landscapes, embroidery, and crafted paper, and, recently, postcards made of precious olive trees and fragments of "permission papers." Recent exhibitions include the *Olive Project KEEP HOPE ALIVE*, Tokyo, Japan (2006).

Yana Payusova (b. 1979, Leningrad, USSR) received her MFA from the University of Colorado at Boulder in Photography & Media Arts. In her large-scale mixed-media paintings, Payusova is exploring timeless concepts of saintliness, sins, holiness, and martyrdom. She has constructed a visual language where traditional black and white photographic images are mixed with painted iconographic elements of Russian Christian Orthodox culture. Payusova has recently been exhibited at the Howard Yezerski Gallery, Boston, MA, and Mimi Ferzt Gallery in New York, NY.

Larissa Sansour (b. 1973, Jerusalem, Palestine) received her MFA from New York University and currently lives in Copenhagen, Denmark. Her work is interdisciplinary, immersed in the current political dialogue and utilizes video art, digital photography, experimental documentary, and the Internet. Recent shows include the Tate Modern in London, UK, in May, 2007 and the National Museum of Queen Sofia in Madrid, Spain, 2007. She is also a curator and a writer, and she produces for independently run artists' channel TV-TV in Copenhagen.

Sherry Wiggins (b. 1955, Indiana, USA) received her MFA from the University of Colorado and lives in Colorado. Wiggins' works as a new media artist, sculptor, public artist, and cultural organizer. Wiggins' work is reflective and participatory, centered around explorations of environmental, political, and women's issues. Wiggins creates digital works and installations that invoke intimacy and connection to specific surroundings and situations. Exhibitions and commissions include the MCA in Denver, CO, BMOCA in Boulder, CO and the Denver International Airport.

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