

BY EDWARD PLATT

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# Forbidden city

Shut out of Jerusalem, Arab artists have responded cleverly.

SIGN-UP

## Future Movements: Jerusalem

*Contemporary Urban Centre, Liverpool*

A short film by the French-Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili makes explicit the smothering restrictions on movement that preoccupy some of the contributors to “Future Movements: Jerusalem”, a group exhibition that opened on the first day of the Liverpool Biennial. Mapping Journey 3 is shot in a single take from above, with a static camera, and shows the hand of an unseen man moving across a map of Jerusalem, as he describes how he gets from his home in Ramallah to his girlfriend’s home in the suburb of Sheikh Jarrah. The 14km drive should take only 15 minutes, but he is forced into a long and potentially dangerous detour to the west of the Qalandia checkpoint, which controls traffic between Ramallah and Jerusalem, because he doesn’t possess a permit to enter the city.

Many of the Palestinian artists who feature in the exhibition do not have permits, either. “Future Movements” is a reprise of a show called “The Other Shadow of the City”, which was put on in Jerusalem last year, and it is testament both to the frustrated affection that inspired it and the difficulties inherent in its production that few of them were able to travel the short distance to Jerusalem to see their work in situ.

Some of the artists have attempted to address the nature of the occupation directly. Contingency, by the Palestinians Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou Rahme, is a soundscape based around tapes recorded at Qalandia. You step inside a darkened booth, and find yourself assaulted by a barrage of noise. A printout in red letters on an LED screen conveys the soldiers’ shouted commands, which are buried within the rumble of machinery and the whine of feedback: “Open the bag.” “We must keep the order.” “MOVE BACK!”

Contingency is disorientating and claustrophobic. Other pieces are more oblique. In Wiki City, Shuruq Harb recast the 14 names for Jerusalem listed on Wikipedia in a system of writing created by an Arab calligrapher. Placed side by side, the plates form a sequence of dots and dashes that seems to embody the movement of traffic or people through the streets of a city that artists such as Harb are not allowed to visit.

Yet it is not only the contemporary Arab presence in Jerusalem that is under threat. The British artist Sarah Beddington has contributed a film that explores the erasure of the city’s Arab history. An 800-year-old cemetery in West Jerusalem is being demolished to make way for an institution called “The Museum of Tolerance”, and Elegy to Mamilla contrasts beautifully composed images of the diggers and workmen shifting the earth with shots of the undisturbed parts.

The global recession has temporarily halted the destruction of Mamilla, but other Arab districts have been destroyed irrevocably – from 1948 to 1967, al-Musrara lay in the no-man’s land between the Israeli and Jordanian sections of Jerusalem and it now lies beneath the main road to Tel Aviv. It survives only in the memories of those old enough to recall its past existence, and on 15 April 1988, the Palestinian-American artist Alexandra Handal walked round it with a former resident called Issa Soudah. Two years later, she pieced together her memories of the day, filtering his recollections through her own and creating a fascinating map of the vanished district.

It is striking that Jawad al-Malhi's panoramic image of a suburb of East Jerusalem is the only piece here by a Palestinian that includes images of the separation barrier. Indeed, the Danish artist Jakob Jakobsen writes, in *The Ramallah Lecture*, a diary of his six-week stay in the West Bank, that Palestinians have grown tired of its presence in representations of their lives. Yet he felt compelled to defy the unofficial ban, as the luridly tinted pictures of Qalandia that illustrate the recording of his diaries make plain.

He justifies his act of disobedience by saying that he wanted to explore the ways in which the images might contribute to “smashing these constructions, concretely and symbolically”. An exhibition of this kind could hardly expect to accomplish such a quixotic aim, but it confirms that Jerusalem enjoys a range of existences – real, recovered and imagined – that no authority can control.

*Until 28 November. For more details visit: contemporaryurbancentre.org*



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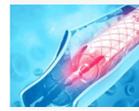
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