

REHAB NAZZAL*DRIVING IN PALESTINE*

September 7 – October 21, 2023

Driving in Palestine

For most Palestinians, freedom of movement is denied or restricted; the act of walking or driving within their native land is one that is continuously subject to adversity. Yet those who do embark upon such a journey find an embodied experience that reveals the effects of settler colonial control as well as a perilous exercise in resistance against the prevailing circumstances.

Between 2010 and 2020, artist and scholar Rehab Nazzal undertook the ambitious and risky endeavour of traversing the breadth of occupied Palestine. The result is a body of work of profound scope spanning photography and video, conceivably situating her oeuvre amongst the most consequential artistic productions of our age.

With this work, Nazzal adeptly harnessed a methodical documentary modus operandi, a practice she employed with a sense of urgency to capture images and sounds that so many do not get to see or hear: the visual and auditory dimensions of Palestine under the pervasive mantle of settler colonial military occupation.

In the course of her artistic undertaking, Nazzal confronted mortal danger firsthand. She was struck in the leg by a sniper's bullet while documenting the Israeli occupation forces' activities in Bethlehem, in an area where the notorious "Skunk" truck—a vehicle dispensing a noxious substance simulating the stench of sewage and decomposing bodies—had been deployed. Undeterred by the obvious risks, Nazzal persevered for an additional five years, striving to capture the expanse and essence of the Palestinian landscape and the settler colonial infrastructure that has been imposed upon its land and inhabitants. The resulting trove of tens of thousands of photographs, videos and audio clips represents not only a substantial artistic oeuvre but also an archive of immeasurable historical value.

Driving in Palestine emerges as a catalytic agent for transformative political impetus, lending both agency and legitimacy to the Palestinian cause, which frequently falls victim to media distortion or suppression. This can be attributed to the unrelenting pressure of the Zionist lobby in Canada, which effectively suppresses any authentic or critical portrayals of the Israeli military occupation.

The framework of international law unequivocally aligns with the proposition that Israel's decades of policy squarely satisfy the definition of apartheid. The act of traversing Palestine by foot or vehicle requires navigating an intricate web of barriers to movement: fortifications, checkpoints, barbed-wire fences, earth mounds, watchtowers, blockades, segregated roads and driving systems. The outcome of these mechanisms in forcibly estranging families is poignantly illustrated: relatives separated by mere kilometers may never see one other again.

The insidious phenomenon of unlawful settlements has culminated in a scenario where, as one section of the apartheid wall approaches completion, another one is already being constructed in front of it, annexing yet more land and further separating Palestinian communities from each other. These constructions evoke parallels with the dystopian architectural drawings of M. C. Escher. As Nazzal navigates Palestine's contours, meticulously chronicling the orchestrated disintegration of communities, water sources and millennia-old olive groves, the act of driving metamorphoses into not only a brazen act of resistance, but a painful grieving process. The gradual and unrelenting dispossession of territory and resources assumes a cadence that resembles nothing more than a calculated regimen of torture imposed upon the Palestinian people.

The 60 stark photographs of watchtowers forming the series *Panoptics in Palestine* were taken as Nazzal drove on open roads and through restricted areas all over her homeland. In a quite subversive reversal of roles, the surveilled artist becomes the surveillant. Nazzal thus returns the military's omnipresent gaze, adroitly amassing essential intelligence along the way. With deft audacity, she concurrently wields a mirror to reflect the actions of the Israeli settler-colonial state, unmasking the devastation it enacts and the atrocities it commits.

Driving in Palestine is a unique topography of present-day Palestine, shaped by Rehab Nazzal's fearless reclamation of land. Signs along the roads and highways on which she drove affixed ominous warnings of mortal danger. Yet she remained undeterred, and, for the first time, we have the privilege of seeing an entirely new body of work, one that exists against all odds.

Respite comes only once in this exhibition, at the end, in the video work entitled *Healing Moments*. The indigenous flora of Palestine is filmed without pretense, often in close-up, showing wild plants, trees and flowers gently swaying in the breeze, with the sound of buzzing insects replacing that of drones. And within this semblance of life's unadulterated beauty lies the poignant aspiration of the Palestinian people—an ardently desired restoration of what once was.

– Stefan St-Laurent, curator

Palestinian-born and Montreal-based interdisciplinary artist **Rehab Nazzal** employs a variety of media to examine the devastating effects of settler-colonial violence on the Palestinian people, land, and non-human life.

Driving in Palestine is a multimedia installation that combines photography, video, printed matter, and sound to offer glimpses of Israel's structures of segregation, confinement, surveillance, and restriction to freedom of movement that proliferate the occupied West Bank.