

University for the Creative Arts
Research Project Portfolios

Displacement, Conflict and Luxury

By Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professors Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon
Name of Output:	Displacement, Conflict and Luxury: Palestinian Contemporary Art
Output Type:	T – Other; multi-component output comprising an edited collection, containing a co-authored chapter, and an exhibition with accompanying catalogue
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>PUBLICATION Edited Collection: Bashir Makhoul and Alnoor Mitha (2016) <i>Conflict and Compassion: A Paradox of Difference in Contemporary Asian Art</i>. Manchester: HOME (ISBN 10 0992952492)</p> <p>Containing: Gordon Hon and Bashir Makhoul (2016) 'From the Empty Grave to the Empty Cradle: Myths of Origin and Art in the Israel/Palestine Conflict', pp. 117-141</p> <p>EXHIBITION <i>The Punishment of Luxury</i> exhibition, Umm el-Fahem Gallery, Israel/Palestine, 24 November 2018 – 23 March 2019 [artist Bashir Makhoul, curators Gordon Hon and Jonathan Harris]</p>
Other Contributors:	<i>Conflict and Compassion</i> co-editor: Alnoor Mitha <i>The Punishment of Luxury</i> co-curator: Jonathan Harris <i>The Punishment of Luxury</i> 'Skein' paintings: Alexander Makhoul
Key Words:	Palestinian art, displacement, luxury, conflict, excess, paradox, identity
UCARO link:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/view/projects/Displacement,_Conflict_and_Luxury.html

Synopsis

‘Displacement, Conflict and Luxury: Palestinian Contemporary Art’ is a research output comprising an edited collection (containing a co-authored chapter) and an exhibition, which together provide both a practical investigation and theorizing of contemporary Palestinian art. The work aims to find new ways of thinking about the production of contemporary art in a globalized and conflicted context.

The research builds upon long standing collaborative research between Professors Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon into the production of contemporary Palestinian art. In particular, it builds upon their previous findings in *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (2013), in which the problematic idea of origins in national identities and their relationships to the production of art formed the central argument.

The collection *Conflict and Compassion*, co-edited by Makhoul and Alnoor Mitha, addresses these ideas through a number

of avenues, including a chapter by Makhoul and Hon on origin and myth. The exhibition *The Punishment of Luxury*, featuring new artworks by Makhoul and co-curated by Hon with Jonathan Harris, allowed for the development of the project towards reflective practice, in which links between the ontology of the work and ideas of origin in the context of contemporary Palestinian art are addressed more directly.

Collectively this research investigates contemporary art practice as both symptomatic and expressive of living with irreconcilable conflicts and paradoxes within national and cultural identity.

This portfolio of contextual information outlines the output’s underpinning research context, aims and methods and includes images of both the installation and realisation of the exhibition. It also includes PDFs of the edited collection and the exhibition catalogue.



*Installation of The Punishment of
Luxury exhibition*



*Installation of The Punishment of
Luxury exhibition*



*Installation of The Punishment of
Luxury exhibition*

Context

The research developed through this project is built upon a long standing collaborative relationship between Professors Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon, and their mutual research interest in contemporary Palestinian art. A significant previous output from this collaboration was the co-authored book *The Origins of Palestinian Art* (2013). In a subsequent review of the book, W.J.T. Mitchell (2014) described it as ‘the most important point of departure for all future writing on this subject’ and this is precisely what has gone on to inform the current work. In particular, the complex relationship between origin and beginning has been developed in two main directions. The first direction is further exploration of myths of origin. The second is in having a more direct involvement in the production and dissemination of contemporary Palestinian art and formulating an approach that allows further research of the idea of origin in the specific context of the Palestine/Israel conflict.

Since the publication of *The Origins of Palestinian Art*, the problem of nationalism has intensified and the relevance of examining its relationship to cultural production is more urgent. This was highlighted at the Asia Triennial Manchester 2014 symposium, which was held at the Imperial War Museum North on 20 November 2014, and from which the edited collection *Conflict and Compassion* emerged. Makhoul and co-editor Alnoor Mitha contributed equally to the collection, bringing together contributions which discuss contemporary artists who produce works that entail both innovation and allusion to conflict in the pan-Asian world.

Within the collection, Makhoul and Hon co-authored the chapter ‘From the Empty Grave to the Empty Cradle’ which expands upon the idea of origin as an ahistorical and temporally confused conception of national identity that can be thought through in critically engaged art practices. A range of Palestinian artists are examined who challenge spatial and temporal boundaries in relation to national identity, notably through works that use national, political and social boundaries

as sites for their practice combined with temporal/spatial ideas of return or speculative futures based on imagined origins. Artists of particular interest include Larissa Sansour, Jumana Manna and Khalil Rabah. The specific political and cultural context of the artists’ works offers a way of thinking through the problematic ideas of origin and identity.

This theoretical underpinning has informed Makhoul and Hon’s artistic and curatorial practice within ‘Displacement, Conflict and Luxury’, drawing together with other connected fields of enquiry to produce the exhibition *The Punishment of Luxury*. For example, Hon’s parallel research interest in psychoanalytic theory, in particular the relationship between Freud’s origin myth of the death drive and the ontology of the work of art (Hon, 2018), also fed into his curatorial perspective on contemporary Palestinian art. Makhoul’s artwork is produced and exhibited transnationally with multi-lingual catalogues and the context for his practice and research can be broadly described as ‘global contemporary art’. At the same time his place within and relation to this context depends very much upon his specific national and cultural heritage, which are in turn contested in global politics. Hon and Makhoul combined these perspectives through the exhibition’s focus on luxury, partly in response to the nature of Makhoul’s practice but also in order to consider the complex relationship between art and excess more broadly.

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Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

A remarkable aspect of art in the region, which became increasingly evident during research for *The Origins of Palestinian Art* and subsequent work, was that not only has contemporary art managed to sustain over decades of military and political conflict, but it has in fact flourished. It is in this present context that the current investigation has been undertaken, and has pursued the following key critical questions:

How can the incorporation of paradox, ambivalence and contradiction in critical art practice and curation open new ways of thinking through national and cultural conflicts in the context of global contemporary art?

In what ways can these processes be developed to extend beyond their specific political and cultural contexts to provide insights into ontological questions of contemporary art?

Can a conscious and deliberate confrontation and exploration of the relationships between art, excess and luxury provide ways of addressing ontological and ethical questions in the production and dissemination of contemporary art?

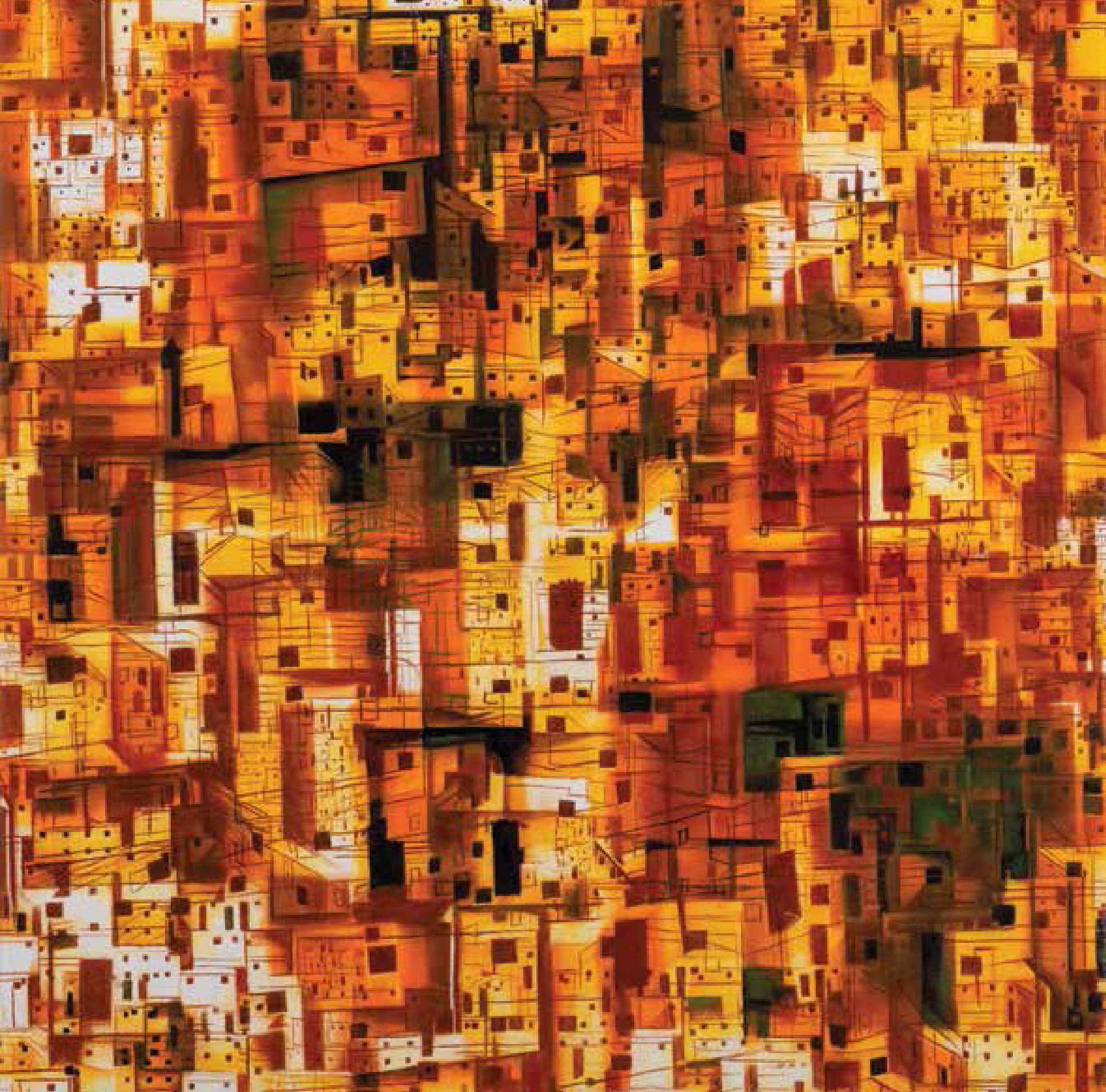
Research aims:

To identify and explore points of disjuncture, paradox and conflict in the production and understanding of contemporary art in the context of the Palestine/Israel conflict

To reveal the ways in which contemporary art practice goes beyond merely reflecting or articulating the socio-political and aesthetic contexts in which it is produced and towards its active, dynamic role in the production and understanding of context



*'Points of View', 2015, printed
tapestry*



'Skein 2', 2018, oil on canvas

Research Methods: Artistic Practice

This project is founded on three decades of Makhoul's artistic practice and theoretical research. Makhoul regards his practice as both symptomatic and expressive of the paradoxes and conflicts that lie at the heart of his identity as a British based, Palestinian artist from Israel working in the context of a globalised art world. Although this has always been the case throughout his practice and research, 'Displacement, Conflict and Luxury' constitutes a sustained project of addressing paradox and conflict that has developed in his recent practice.

For Makhoul, the research began with his involvement with the Asia Triennial Manchester 2014 in which he exhibited the large scale installation 'Genie' which itself was a development of previous projects such as 'Enter Ghost, Exit Ghost' (2012). In these works Makhoul used thousands of cardboard boxes to create itinerant cities in order to explore ideas of displacement and the groundlessness of stateless refugees. Makhoul took these ideas to the symposium that accompanied the Asia Triennial and which led to his collaboration with Alnoor Mitha in the co-edited volume *Conflict and Compassion: A Paradox of Difference in Contemporary Asian Art*. This was an opportunity for Makhoul to explore the broader regional context, to which Mitha brought his expertise, and Makhoul contributed the idea of paradox and conflict to which the invited scholars were asked to respond in their own contributions.

This work led directly to *The Punishment of Luxury*, for which Makhoul decided to pay particular attention to the role of paradox in understanding the relationship between identity, conflict and the ontology of the work of art. The exhibition marked a return to his homeland, not far from where he was born, and was an opportunity to consider the specificity of the site in terms of his own conflicted identity and the problematic status of a Palestinian city in Israel. Umm el-Fahem is next to the border wall in the north eastern Wadi district of Israel and is notable for being geographically and officially inside Israel whilst feeling much like a Palestinian West Bank city.

It has been unilaterally proposed by some Israeli politicians as a possible site for a territory and population exchange in any proposed Palestinian state. The political and economic status of the town is therefore under constant question. It is overcrowded and underfunded with a high level of unemployment and, more typical of Palestinian cities in the occupied territories, has a young demographic with a pressurised and barely containable energy. It is a place in which necessity and excess are in close proximity.

It was with this context in mind that the structuring concepts of luxury, excess and necessity were developed for the exhibition, exemplified by the central installation 'Shift'. 'Shift' was a development of Makhoul's use of empty packing boxes in 'Genie' (2014), in addition to later installation 'The Lost House' (2015) in which ideas of precarity and displacement were juxtaposed with materials that implied permanence and stability such as steel and gold. 'Shift' featured thousands of small gold 'houses' in the form of 'luxury' containers for Za'atar. The utilitarian value of these 'houses' as containers is destroyed by the holes cut into them to represent doors and windows. The failed containers and spilled Za'atar form a shifting mound of houses and unusable food with an overwhelming, luxurious smell of the homeland. For a Palestinian audience in particular, the use of Za'atar is an unavoidable reference to the Tel al Za'atar massacre and its association with martyrdom.

The exhibition also included tapestries based on stylised versions of houses and hanging carpets depicting the holes in homes shelled during the Lebanese war. Nine paintings, the 'Skein' series, were created by Makhoul with his son Alexander. This series draws attention to Makhoul's collaborative approach, reflecting the breadth and complexity of his practice, but also to the importance of the self and family. The central paradox in relation to identity in the exhibition was the simultaneous presentation of loss and plenitude which was in part Makhoul's own feelings in returning to his homeland.

Research Methods: Curatorial Practice

The title and positioning of the exhibition within ideas of luxury was developed through discussions and planning during which Hon as curator was primarily responding critically to works produced by Makhoul. This entailed a joint exploration of the impossibility of separating necessity and excess, in which identity is simultaneously an essential component of the human subject and an extravagant luxury. In this way Hon and Makhoul were able to use the intersecting roles of curator and artist, at a critical point in the production of the work, in order for the exhibition to extend and focus the research questions.

While Hon and Jonathan Harris contributed equally to the curation of the exhibition, they brought different perspectives, and this is reflected in their written contributions to the exhibition catalogue. Harris was primarily concerned with developing Makhoul's ongoing engagement with the legacies of modernism and his position as a Palestinian émigré artist within the context of a post-modern globalised art world. Hon, however, was particularly interested in George Bataille's (1991) idea that 'it is not necessity but its contrary, "luxury" that presents living matter and mankind with their fundamental problem.' According to Bataille the necessities of life, such as food and shelter are relatively easy to achieve by organised societies, but almost every aspect of human activity and production is far in excess of these necessities. His economic theory is based on this excess and on the structural necessity of useless expenditure. Artistic activity is therefore always already a luxury, originating in excess.

Hon builds upon the connection Mark Featherstone (2016) makes between Freud's Death Drive (Todestreib), as the drive in living organisms towards a return to an inorganic state, and Bataille's idea of luxury. Featherstone conceives of 'a kind of Neronian ethics of the luxurious' founded on the connection made by Bataille between luxury and death as the ultimate expenditure, regarding luxury as that which ultimately exceeds life and base matter. Hon takes this connection

between Freud's Death Drive and Bataille's 'general economy' of luxury further. Based on Freud's insistence that Todestreib is the original drive behind all drives, Hon argues that it has a similar position to the 'sun' in Bataille's economics of excess, as the original and continuous excessive expenditure of energy.

According to Bataille all life is ultimately unified towards its own expenditure in death. Art as luxury shares this original drive towards exceeding its materiality and the use of Bataillian economics of excess offers another approach to the ontology of the work of art and understanding its relationship to its immediate context. Previous iterations of some works exhibited in *The Punishment of Luxury* have been written about in terms of their significance in relation to Palestinian identity and the Israel/Palestine conflict. However, their use of luxurious materials, such as tapestries and gold plating to render images of war and precarious life, have not been properly explored and the re-contextualising of the work within these ideas of luxury was the main aim of this exhibition. The central, site specific installation 'Shift', was developed with this theoretical framing in mind and together with the other selected works formed a conscious and deliberate confrontation and exploration of the relationships between art, excess and luxury in the specific context of Palestine. In this way the exhibition attempted to address the ways in which the works exceed their materiality as well as exceeding their interpretable content in terms of the specific cultural and political context of the Israel/Palestine conflict and Palestinian identity.

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*'Preoccupation 2', 2018,
oil on canvas*



*'Preoccupation', 2018, oil on canvas
(left) and 'Shift', 2018, tin and
za'atar (right)*

Research Insights and Contribution

A central position taken by this research is that ideas of origin, which are at the core of the Israel/Palestine conflict, do not produce nationalism or national identities but are produced by them. This is extended to the production of Palestinian art which, it is argued in the *Conflict and Compassion* book, is as much productive of its context as it is produced by it. Rather than just attempting to understand Palestinian contemporary art by first understanding the historical, political and cultural context of Palestine, the study of Palestinian art and cultural production is in itself a way of understanding Palestine. National identity is partly constructed through the production of art.

In their previous research, Makhoul and Hon had found that most artists in the region (including the post-Nakba who experienced the 1967 war, their students, and Makhoul himself, who were caught up in the intifada of 1987, and the younger generation of artists who came of age during the second intifada of 2001), regarded the last twenty years as something of a golden age of Palestinian art. On reflecting upon this the researchers had found that an unresolved question remained regarding not only the continued production of art in the region despite the ongoing context of conflict, but the fact that it had apparently thrived. Neither the familiar arguments of the development of a new globalized art context, nor that art is a necessity for the sustaining of a cultural identity, fully accounted for the apparent excess of this 'golden age'.

Importantly, it was through the development of Bataille's ideas of luxury in *The Punishment of Luxury* exhibition that the researchers have found not only a way of accounting for this excess, but also as another way of thinking through ideas of origin and origination. Hon's curatorial contribution found that the combined use of Freud's Todestrieb as the original drive with Bataille's economic theory of excess have led to the insight that art as luxury is also driven towards

exceeding its materiality. This insight has implications for understanding the relationship between contemporary art and luxury beyond this context. Current ideas of luxury tend to be determined by its place in advanced globalised capitalism, often focussed on particular forms of commodities and brands. This understanding also tends to be extended to art as a form of luxury, focussing on the excesses of the global art market, despite this only accounting for a tiny proportion of artistic production. The understanding of the relationship between art and luxury developed in this project would regard a small painting produced by an unknown artist in Gaza as much of a luxury as a Jeff Koons Rabbit. A different amount of energy has been expended in their production and, although the Jeff Koons is at a disadvantage because of its value as a tool of capital accumulation, ultimately the expenditure of energy has been equally useless. Reconceiving luxury beyond the debilitating constraints of capitalism, as Bataille did, opens up philosophical and ethical possibilities in our understanding of contemporary art.

In terms of the work produced by Makhoul for the exhibition and the exhibition itself in Umm el-Fahem, this insight offers a way of understanding contemporary Palestinian art within the specific context of its political and cultural production and dissemination as well as identifying contrary forces and paradox at their centre. Within this conceptual framework Makhoul also identified further uses of paradox in the conceptualisation and production of the work. This was exemplified by the installation 'Shift' in which conflicting ideas of necessity and luxury, settlement and dislocation and loss and plenitude occupied the same space. The complexity and specificity of Makhoul's identity as it is explored through this sustained use of paradox and an unsettled relationship between form and content can offer ways of thinking about the experience and affects of globalisation, location and conflict.

Further Development of the Research

While completing the installation for *The Punishment of Luxury* Makhoul was also planning a new work for the exhibition *A Stitch in Time* at the Today Museum in Beijing. He had been particularly interested in the material instability of 'Shift' in that after its completion and during the exhibition it continued to subtly change as it settled. This was reflected in the choice of title and drew attention to a semantic paradox of settlement that suggested both stability and instability. For the new installation, titled 'Fata Morgana' (2019), he extended this idea by building the installation on a ground of salt. The 'houses' were this time made of thousands of small ceramic containers that were also 'failed' salt cellars which continued to settle into the unstable ground. 'Fata Morgana' thus carried with it ideas of necessity and luxury and a destabilised ground explored in Umm el-Fahem but with different, locally produced objects and materials and which in the hyper-developing context of contemporary China have very different resonances and associations.

The work was also a response to the temporal aspect of the curated exhibition's title '*A Stitch in Time*'. The choice of title for the installation, 'Fata Morgana', refers to the maritime mirage

in which an island or a ship appears to hover above the sea on the horizon. This was in part a return to the idea of levitation and groundlessness that had emerged from his installation 'Genie' but in 'Fata Morgana' the reference was more explicitly directed towards ideas of settlement and displacement.

In discussing Makhoul's recent installations, including *The Punishment of Luxury* and 'Fata Morgana', Jonathan Harris (2021) notes that the works 'intervene to comment on and perhaps to condemn the world as it is [...] but they also present spectacular and beautiful aesthetic forms that offer to transcend that world – that soar or veer away from the daily reality and the socio-political conditions that have produced the reality of refugee-status homelessness for millions of people in Palestine and elsewhere. In this sense Makhoul's artworks manage to be deeply moral and amoral – demonstrating "aesthetically disinterestedness" – at the same time.'

Harris, J. (2021) 'They Make a Desert and Call it Peace' in Harris, J. (ed) *Terrorism and the Arts: Practices and Critiques in Contemporary Cultural Production*. NY: Routledge. p. 117.



'Shift', 2018, tin and za'atar



*'Fata Morgana', A Stitch in Time
exhibition, Beijing*



*'Fata Morgana', A Stitch in Time
exhibition, Beijing*



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COVER IMAGES

*Detail from 'Shift', 2018, tin and
za'atar*

