

ARTIST TALK

Join us for a conversation between critic Merray Gerges and Jumana Manna (via Skype)
Saturday 29 April 2017, 2PM | Free and all welcome

BIOGRAPHIES

Jumana Manna (b.1987) is a visual artist working primarily with film and sculpture. Her work explores how power is articulated through relationships, often focusing on the body and materiality in relation to narratives of nationalism, and histories of place. Recent solo exhibitions include venues such as Chisenhale Gallery, London, UK (2015); Malmö Konsthall, SE (2016); Beirut Art Center, Lebanon (2015); and Sculpture Center, New York, USA (2014). She has participated in group exhibitions at Kunsthalle Wien, Liverpool Biennial, 20th Biennale of Sydney, Marrakech Biennale 6, The Jerusalem Show VII, Al Ma'mal Foundation, and Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Bærum. Her films have been screened in festivals such as the 54th Viennale International Film Festival, 66th Berlinale Forum and IFFR Rotterdam. Manna was awarded the A.M. Qattan Foundation's Young Palestinian Artist Award in 2012, the Ars Viva Prize for Visual Arts 2017, and is currently nominated for the Preis der Nationalgalerie für junge Kunst in Berlin. She is based in Berlin.

Merray Gerges studied art history and journalism in Halifax. She was previously a writer-in-residence at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, and is currently a staff writer at Canadian Art. Her reporting, criticism and lectures have ranged from discussing the radical potential, and shortcomings, of intersectional feminist memes and ASMR connections between zit-popping and slime videos, to art-world race politics and tokenism.



Jumana Manna *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* is presented in collaboration with the 30th Images Festival, 20-27 April 2017. For further information, visit imagesfestival.com



SPACE: Francisco-Fernando Granados

31 March – 22 June 2017

The next artist to create a commissioned work for our SPACE billboard project will be Francisco-Fernando Granados.

Francisco-Fernando Granados' multidisciplinary critical practice spans performance, installation, cultural theory, digital media, public art, curatorial and community-based projects. He has presented work in galleries, museums, theatres, artist-run centres and non-traditional sites including: Art Gallery of York University; Blackwood Gallery; Gallery TPW; Vancouver Art Gallery; Darling Foundry (Montreal); the Hessel Museum of Art (Bard, NY); Ex Teresa Arte Actual (Mexico City); and Kulturhuset (Stockholm). He completed a Masters of Visual Studies at the University of Toronto in 2012, and is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of Art, Critical and Curatorial Studies Program at OCAD University.

SPACE is a series of commissioned works for the billboard space on the side of Mercer Union. The series began in the spring of 2014, previous contributing artists include: Liz Knox (CA), Giles Round (UK), Walter Scott (CA), Olivia Plender (UK/SE), Maggie Groat (CA), Carlos Motta (USA), and most recently Deborah Edmeades (CA).

Image: Francisco-Fernando Granados *towards a minor abstraction* (2016-ongoing), Digital drawing, courtesy of the artist.

Stellar Living 2017

An Auction of Contemporary Art to Benefit Mercer Union

AUCTION NIGHT Tuesday 25 April 2017 | Doors at 6PM | Auction at 7PM
LOCATION Scrap Metal Gallery, 11 Dublin Street, Unit E, Toronto
TICKETS \$80 | stellarliving.eventbrite.ca

Mercer Union is proud to present Stellar Living 2017, our signature fundraising auction. The proceeds contribute essential funds to exhibitions and programs at Mercer Union, and help us maintain our position as Toronto's leading artist-run centre.

PARTICIPATING ARTISTS Lois Andison, David Armstrong Six, Shuvinai Ashoona, Karen Azoulay, Steven Beckly, Alex Bierk, Kotama Bouabane, Patrick Cruz, Robert Davidovitz, Julia Dault, Marcel Dzama, Laura Findlay, James Gardner, Eric Glavin, Jérôme Havre, Aryen Hoekstra, Lili Huston-Herterich, Laurie Kang, Jean-Paul Kelly, Shawn Kuruneru, Micah Lexier, Derek Liddington, Jimmy Limit, Duane Linklater, Liz Little, Marianne Lovink, Annie MacDonell, Jenine Marsh, Isabel M. Martínez, Elizabeth McIntosh, Alex McLeod, Hazel Meyer, Ollia Mischenko, Kent Monkman, Sarah Nasby, Rob Nicholls, Susy Oliviera, Paul P., Luke Painter, Ryan Park, Oliver Pauk, Paulette Phillips, Ed Pien, Sasha Pierce, Jaan Poldas, Public Studio, Kerri Reid, Steve Reinke, Brian Rideout, Tony Romano, Jade Rude, Sarah Sands Phillips, Jennifer Rose Sciarino, Walter Scott, Cole Swanson, Scott Treleaven, Haley Uyeda, VSVSVS, Robert Wiens, and Elizabeth Zvonar

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Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

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Mercer Union acknowledges the support of its staff, volunteers and members, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Arts Council and the City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council



Cover image: Jumana Manna, *Blue Elbow* (2015), Plaster, burlap, plastic, pigment and lacquer.
Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery, New York.

Overleaf: Jumana Manna, *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* (2015), Video stills. Co-commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation and Chisenhale Gallery with Malmö Konsthall and the Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery, New York.

ISBN: 978-1-926627-0

SONIC PRINT Co. CA



Jumana Manna *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me*

1 April – 27 May 2017
Opening reception Friday 31 March, 7-10PM



Presented in collaboration with the 30th Images Festival



With Arms Spread Wide

Merray Gerges

The day I began writing this essay, Facebook reminded me that “On This Day... 3 years ago,” I had posted a video of Katy Perry’s “Dark Horse,” featuring Juicy J, with the caption “i h8 this.” In the Ancient Egypt-themed fantasy candy-hued video for the trap track, Perry poses as an enthroned Cleopatra assessing the service of desperate suitors throwing themselves at her feet. Almost as if on cue, my white friends exclaimed their disgust at Perry’s cavalier cultural appropriation, but an Egyptian friend I had met at a Christian camp in Egypt’s Wadi Natroun desert 11 years ago—whom I haven’t seen since because I haven’t returned since—shared my post with an Arabic caption. Written in English characters, where numbers substituted Arabic phonetics that have no English equivalent, it praised Perry’s so-called ‘homage’ for honouring Egyptian culture in a way that many young Egyptians don’t today.

Though the stakes and parameters are not identical, the intrinsic tensions in questions of conservation and who’s to be held accountable for it, followed by the evaluation of authenticity and thus validity, underlies Jumana Manna’s *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* (2015). In this feature-length film, Manna takes as her starting point a debate between Robert Lachmann and Wasif Jawhariyyeh. Lachmann was a German Jewish ethnomusicologist who lost his job as a music librarian during the Nazi rise to power and relocated to Palestine in 1935 with the intention to create an archive of Oriental Music, and ran a weekly radio program.¹ Jawhariyyeh, a Palestinian oud player, left behind detailed accounts of his interactions with the daily lives of diverse communities in Jerusalem during the first half of the 20th century in his memoir. In one of Jawhariyyeh’s chapters, he recounts an argument he had with Lachmann over the future of Arabic music and the question of notation. Lachmann was of the mind that Oriental music should remain unspoiled by the West. For him, the system of Western notation was inappropriate for Oriental music due to its quarter-tone system, and because it was “too emotional” to be strictly written down. He feared that European classical music and Egyptian pop, arriving through records and the radio, would alter Palestinian taste and devalue its musical tradition. Jawhariyyeh, on the other hand, thought that notation was a way to preserve—and to progress—traditional music, which had primarily been memorized, passed down orally and sonically, and was therefore at risk of being forgotten. “For me, this disagreement encapsulated some of the dilemmas of modernity, and the bifurcated relationship of Palestine to the West,”² Manna says in an interview. She adds, “What do you use as a model of progress?”³

Shot in the West Bank, in Jerusalem and Israel, Manna moves between these territories seemingly seamlessly, so that we can’t tell how much distance, or which borders, she has traversed to rove between intimate interiors, mostly kitchens, to unfinished buildings and arid, almost-static, desert landscapes. “I thought of Lachmann’s program as radio waves spilling out across a territory, and participating in shaping that territory. In a sense, I follow those waves,”⁴ she says. This border traversal is Manna’s effort to ignore the disputed borders that Israel has imposed, and attempt to imagine “a long-term one-state, bi-national solution that rethinks the territory not through segregation but through a kind of federative model, where there are equal rights for all Israelis and Palestinians [...]”⁵

Lachmann invited the communities that he studied—including Kurdish, Moroccan, and Yemenite Jews, Samaritans, members of urban and rural Palestinian communities, Bedouins and Coptic Christians—to perform on his weekly *Oriental Music* broadcasts. His hope was to challenge the divide between Arab and Jew, and to educate, especially European listeners, about the diversity within Palestine and the importance of cross-cultural study.

Manna’s narration of Lachmann’s notes bookends her interviews, often begun by playing her subjects recordings from his radio program on her smartphone. We see her hands leafing through his records—the notes from his radio lecture series, archival photographs, photographs he may have taken himself—asserting her own presence as an ethnographer. In an almost-impartial voice-over, she reads the declarative statements that he made, that “it is almost impossible to discuss Eastern music without being led into the past because Arabic music was handed down from antiquity, a legacy that is ever-present in musicians’ minds,” and that hybrid production makes contemporary Arabic music “shallow like ditchwater.”



Jumana Manna, *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* (2015), Video stills. Co-commissioned by the Sharjah Art Foundation and Chisenhale Gallery with Malmö Konsthall and the Biennale of Sydney. Courtesy of the artist and CRG Gallery, New York.

Manna’s subjects emulate Lachmann’s recordings of their forebears, yet in their own way they each avow, to varying degrees, either Lachmann or Jawhariyyeh’s conflicting stances towards the conservation of traditional music for posterity.

In one scene, a Samaritan priest lays out a 600 year-old leather-bound handwritten Torah as he tells her about Samaritans in Nablus, the smallest (population: 780), and possibly the oldest minority in Palestine. Manna plays them Lachmann’s recording of a Samaritan high priest singing, and since priesthood is hereditary, this lineage comes full circle as the current high priest’s wife turns out to be the daughter of the high priest that Lachmann encountered a generation prior. The priest tells his wife to return from the kitchen to listen to her father’s voice, which he says is unlike any voice today, but she doesn’t want to. She counters, “[b]ut I don’t know him. I wish that I could only dream of him,” announcing how he left her mother at the age of 22 with six children.

In another scene, a meal simmers on the stovetop as a Mizrahi (Eastern Jewish) woman sings to a tune that her husband plays, his eyes trailing her as she moves. She tells of her childhood home where the image and the flag of Israel were hung “and the myths were ready to be told,” until her grandmother challenged this Israeli myth of ethnic purity that sought to erase their Jewish-Moroccan, Arab-rooted lineage. Resisting the inclination to lament this marginalization, she argues that as a creator, her peripheral existence to a monolithic Israeli culture that attempted to flatten and annihilate the complications (and contradictions) of diaspora was to her advantage, enabling a voluntary self-preservation.

One man asks another, “Is this land, which you are living on, your land? What brought you here?” The Palestinian-Bedouin elder responds that they’ve been there since 1954 when the Jews (i.e. The Israeli state) brought them there. Manna plays them a Lachmann recording of a rababa—a bowed string instrument dating back to the eighth century, which Lachmann says is invaluable wondering whether it will “survive the influx of modern civilization”—and the group debate whether the old recording was in fact played by Bedouin or a peasant. They lament how “the Internet ruined it for us,” asserting that no one thinks of it now because they must work round-the-clock, and that all rababas today are commercial products. The man who steps up to emulate Lachmann’s recording from the 1930s remarks that he hadn’t played the rababa in 10 years.

In the final scene, Manna plays Lachmann’s recording of wedding music to two men, which they emulate with their flutes. Osama Abu Ali makes these instruments in his attic, burrowing and sanding holes, while his wife speaks of his popularity, especially in the West Bank. Osama says that in popular music such as Dabke—a rhythmic stomp-heavy group dance performed at weddings and celebrations in Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon—notation should be forbidden. For him, it wouldn’t do anything in a wedding; he’d rather conjure up musicians from 100 years ago to embody “Palestinian soul.” He plays a flute half his height, alongside a man who plays a digital keyboard that replaces multiple instruments. In a climactic eruption of song, a grandfather who is losing his eyesight wanders in and starts to dance jubilantly, his arms spread wide.

Manna says that she wanted to record musical performances in a similar way to Lachmann, so interspersed between her conversations we see musicians who are not interview subjects: first, one musician plays the darbuka, a traditional Arabic goblet hand-drum, and another a hollow tin container; a Torah recital and collective chanting in a synagogue; and a Kurdish-Israeli plays a saz in his real estate appraiser’s office, reading lyrics from his laptop screen in an instance, aside from Manna’s smartphone, where we’re reminded that tradition and technology are not mutually exclusive.

The fact that her father is an historian is a recurring thread that weaves a timeline of events through Manna’s collected narratives to loosely situate them in time and space. Her mother tells her father to take out the compost before it stinks, to wash a pot, while he tells his wife (Jumana’s mother) about his Iraqi friend who wishes he could return to Iraq but cannot because it’s too dangerous now. Meanwhile, he makes coffee, singing along to “You Oppress Me” by Umm Kulthum, a 20th-century Egyptian pop singer who is known to be one of the most esteemed icons of the Arab world and a symbol for pan-Arabism. Critic Edward Said described the “significant role”⁶ she

played “in the emerging Third World women’s movement as a pious ‘Nightingale of the East’ whose public exposure was as a model not only of feminine consciousness but also of domestic propriety.”⁷ Jumana’s father later tells her about a seven-day massacre in the Nakba (the Palestinian catastrophe) of 1948, while her mother does yoga on the living room rug. Later, as he prepares to go for a swim, he tells her in Arabic about an 1899 correspondence between Yusuf Dia’ al-Khalidi, mayor of Jerusalem, with Theodor Herzl, the father of modern political Zionism, where al-Khalidi objects to the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine—though he empathizes with Jewish suffering—because Palestine is full of Palestinians! And because Jerusalem, is holy for Muslims, Jews and Christians alike. He proposes that Jews and Arabs should rather unite against any foreign occupation of Palestine. Herzl responded like a real estate developer, assuring al-Khalidi that Arabs would have no reason to fear Zionism because the Jews’ arrival would improve Palestinian property value.

Manna’s subjects are resilient by virtue of existing today. Their stories of displacement, attempted cultural erasure and segregation, often brush against the banalities and the crassness of everyday life—discussions of garbage collection schedules, a request for Manna to relocate her car. Fleeting images of a table of land expropriation, or a document from the Judea and Samaria Area [Israeli terminology for the West Bank] Supreme Planning Council, for example, serve as seemingly benign bureaucratic reminders of the ongoing apartheid. “Even if [the film] is talking about these grand historical narratives,” as Manna says, “it’s also about daily life, resilience and perseverance as continuity. [...] The music manages, despite this state of impasse, to carry that transcendental, magical potentiality.”⁸ When her subjects imitate Lachmann’s recordings of their ancestors’ musical output in the same breath that they tell stories of how they weathered the very conditions he didn’t anticipate would threaten the purity of their cultural production, they simultaneously muddle Jawhariyyeh’s call for accurate notation and Lachmann’s desire for purity.

Ultimately, of course, Lachmann was misguided. Even just the film’s opening track is a testament to the impossibility of his desire: “Linda, Linda” was written and composed by Samir al-Tawil, a Syrian living in Egypt in the mid 1970s, and remade time and again by Middle Eastern pop singers of various nationalities, including Mizrahi singer Haim Moshe, whose version was a huge hit in Israel in 1983. *A Magical Substance Flows Into Me* questions what the stakes might be for such a project today. As Manna says, “I feel like this film is trying to give advice: the present is giving advice to the past.”⁹

1. Lachmann’s *Oriental Music* program was transmitted on the Palestinian Broadcasting Service between November 1936 and April 1937.

2. See Guggenheim, Katie. 2015. “Interview with Jumana Manna,” Chisenhale Gallery, London. http://chisenhale.org.uk/images/exhibitions/Interview_with_Jumana_Manna.pdf

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Said, Edward. 1990. “Homage to a Belly-Dancer.” *London Review of Books*. <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v12/n17/edwardsaid/homage-to-a-belly-dancer>

7. Ibid.

8. See Guggenheim, Katie. 2015. “Interview with Jumana Manna,” Chisenhale Gallery, London.

9. Ibid.