



Looking for Palestine.
Portraits. *by David Brunetti*

“The danger is that the Palestinian remains a topic. Not a self.”

Mahmoud Darwish



Maya Khaldi is a Palestinian musician and singer. Maya is singing with several groups and has performed numerous Jazz-fusion gigs with Palestinian musicians. Maya also teaches music theory, early childhood music education and conducts three choirs at The Edward Said National Conservatory of Music.



Majd Abdel Hamid is an international artist. Born in Syria, he lives and works in Ramallah. Majd's work - Mohamad Bouazizi & Pain Killers - broaches controversial topics and aims to create a uniquely Palestinian artistic voice. His work has been featured in exhibitions in Ramallah, London, Toulouse, Lund and Torino.

Many people tend to see Palestinians through the lens of their chosen stereotype because we're all brought up with certain clichés about Palestine.

And though there are exceptions, these stereotypes are all we hear and know about.

The picture that then emerges, of something called Palestine, is surprisingly consistent and coherent.

There is a lot of material contributing to the creation of this unified image of Palestine and Palestinians – with a set character and characteristics emphasising broad themes of refugee flows and dispossession, anger, violence and resistance – that just keeps coming back.

But what do we expect from representations about this land that is everywhere and nowhere, on all our television screens and newspapers? But not in a territory it can confidently call its own?

What do we think we know about this place that is real and familiar as well as fictional and foreign?

We expect work about Palestine to show us individuals consumed by victimhood or criminality.

Images so harsh that we convince ourselves that the situation however tragic simply cannot be helped.

Guns, blood, and wailing mothers, piercing screams and bodies consumed with rage and grief.

We expect to see people, and though they resemble us in many ways, whose circumstances, actions and reactions make them wholly 'other' in relation to ourselves.

We see victims whose character has become defined and deformed by the occupation and apartheid.

We see anonymous people without agency stripped of the banalities of daily life that make them human.

There's a lot that is misunderstood or not seen by the people, and the media, in the West.

The result of the medias focus on a select few visual tropes that casts Palestinians as either victims of the occupation (in one way or another) or radicalised terrorists means that all people in Palestine come to be understood in the same limited and destructive way.

Understanding a complex society such as Palestine in this narrow way takes away from the humanity and diversity of ordinary Palestinians.

But there is no Palestinian 'defect', there is no 'other.'

And Palestine simply is not the place so many of us presume to know.

It may not 'exist' as a geographical entity. But Palestine exists in an intangible manner, as a space of memory and future hope.

Palestine is a promise that is constantly on the threshold of a physical reality.

And the Palestinians I met are confident that Palestine will continue to develop and mature, despite its shrinking territory. Palestine is insisting on its existence, it's refusing to be forgotten because Palestinians defiantly live their identity everyday.

They have been resisting by singing, dancing, reciting poetry, celebrating their heritage, their craftsmanship, Palestinian food and art and by remembering.

They refuse to forget who they are or to abandon their identity.

Facing relentless adversity, Palestinians have to constantly reconstruct the sense of normality that we take for granted.

We often don't realise how vulnerable this illusion of normality and stability is.



Sari Sakakini and his wife **Dana**, an architect, in Orjuwan, a beautiful Italian-Palestinian fusion restaurant overlooking Ramallah with a sofa strewn patio, a wine bar and dining room under vaulted ceilings. Though Orjuwan opened 5 years ago and, with its mix of good food and live music, is a fixture in the booming nightlife of Ramallah, Sari is concerned about the fragility of a business because tensions with Israel can flare up at any moment. Yet Sari, who is co-owner of Orjuwan (along with his siblings Salim and Katia), is determined to offer a sophisticated dining experience in Palestine. Food is central to the Palestinian identity and for Sari there is no reason why, even under occupation, they can't produce gourmet Palestinian food.

It's at risk of being undermined, broken down, and even annihilated. It's in need of fervent protection.

And this is what the people of Palestine do.

They keep going, rebuilding, restarting, and living, no matter what keeps coming.

This ongoing portrait project doesn't set out to speak for Palestinians or tell stories of the occupation.

It's intended to be a corrective portrait of people who – having to negotiate conflict, resist occupation and who may have been reduced to stereotypes – are confident, ambitious, talented and capable individuals.

The people I've met don't defy stereotypes. They are their own persons. Their work, passions, craft and art are exercises in understanding and efforts to comprehend the transience of things that are essential in shaping life.



Hanin Taraby is a Palestinian actress. Born in the Lower Galilee, Hanin is a Palestinian citizen of Israel. Hanin studied at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. She works with numerous theatres and ensembles both within Israel and the occupied West Bank, and has appeared in TV productions and movies such as "Lesh Sabreen" (2009) and "The Cup Reader" (2013).

I believe that seeing is transformation.

Seeing is change. And I want to be changed. I want to understand the world we live in today and how history continues to impact us.

I want to tell stories. With pictures. And my portraits. Because I believe there is so much to be learned. The world is full of stories that need to be told. And I believe that by listening to other people's stories, by seeing their realities through their eyes, we can learn.

Photography is my tool to record the lives and stories of my sitters, to document our world and our relationships in it. And it's my way of assuring my sitters that their lives are important.

Though it may be a simple approach to my work, I believe that it contains the potential to change. To change myself. And to change the way people who have lived through conflict, have fled war or are still

experiencing conflict today, are seen.

Not as victims. But people who choose life.

I sometimes say that my work as issue based but I think my photography is mainly proof that I, but most importantly the people in my images, were here. We lived.



The cast of "Kheil Tayha" (Lost Horses) - (l-r) Yasmin Hammar, Ihab Zahdeh (director), Reem Talhami, Raed Al Shyoukhi, Hanin Taraby, Mohammed Titi and Noor Al Raei (music) - after the final dress rehearsal. "Kheil Tayha," by Adnan Al Odeh, weaves together stories and songs about love, sadness, passion and longing reflecting on the life and traditions in the ash-Sham desert, and has since been shown in Hebron, Ramallah and East Jerusalem.



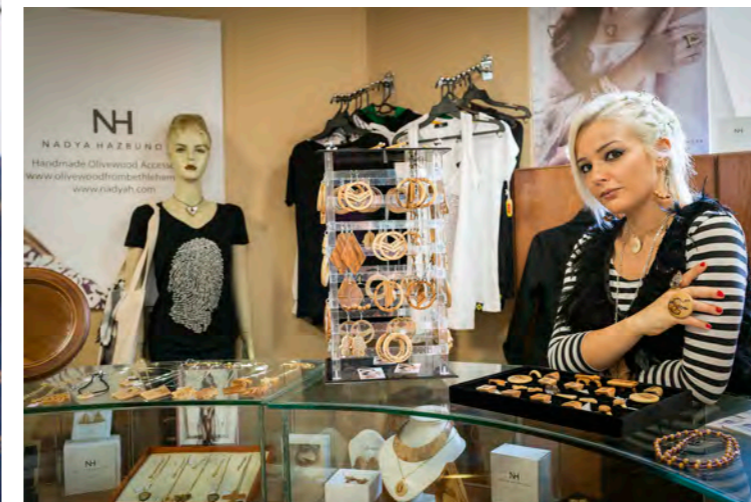
Shehada Shalalda is a violin maker. When the Al Kamandjati music school opened next to his family home in the old city of Ramallah, Shehada could hear the music accross the yard sparking his interest to pick up the violin. He was always curious about the instruments and when a violin maker visited the school he used the opportunity to learn more about how to make, repair and service violins. From then on, he shadowed all visiting violin makers before being invited to a workshop in Italy where he built his first violin. Shehada eventually studied violin making and repair in the UK.



Sharif Nashashibi is a Palestinian-Syrian journalist and analyst on Arab affairs based in London. He's co-founder of the Arab Media Watch, and a regular contributor to Al Arabiya English, The Middle East magazine, The Guardian, The National, the Middle East Eye and Al Jazeera.



Ihab Zahdeh is a professional actor and director from Hebron. A passionate theatre actor, he works with several ensembles across the West Bank, including the Ashtar Theatre, and has performed at the Globe in London. He is also the co-founder of Yes Theatre (Masra7 Na'am) in Hebron. Ihab works as a drama teacher at the community theatre project that promotes the performing arts for children and young adults. Hebron is a conservative city with few after school activities for children and teenagers. Masra7 Na'am offers a welcoming, inclusive and safe space that encourages creativity and curiosity. Besides a lifelong appreciation of theatre and the arts, the children gain social skills and build confidence by producing plays that reflect their everyday experiences.



Nadya Hazbunova is a Palestinian-Czech fashion and jewelry designer. Fashion, for Nadya, is a way of demonstrating who Palestinian women truly are. The core of Nadya's work reflects aspects of Palestinian identity - elegant, confident, fashion conscious - which is unknown to many outside Palestine. She wants to reveal a different side to the Palestinian way life, especially of local women. Nadya blends traditional Palestinian crafts, like Olive wood carving, Arabic calligraphy and verses of Mahmoud Darwish poems with her elegant designs to create beautiful and unique pieces that celebrate Palestinian identity.



Mona Ennab in her home she shares with her mother. Mona was the first female racing driver in the West Bank and is a member of an all female team - the Speed Sisters. Her mother has always supported her, bought Mona's first car and is travelling to all her races with her. She told me how was proud she is of Mona, her achievements, passion and commitment. Mona spoke about the prejudice she faced when she started out but now she's just one of the drivers. The only thing the boys may get upset about, she laughed, was that the girls are better drivers. "We win races. And they don't."



Taysir Odeh MC and producer in his studio in Ramallah. Taysir ("Teto") is joined by Laith Hijjawai ("Leo"), Osama Sa'ed ("Twist") and Haitham Hijjawi ("Jokey") to complete the hip hop crew **West Bank Band**, which was founded in 2009 when the members were still at university. Hip Hop and Rap are very popular in Palestine and the members of WBB started the band because the music of Western and Arabic artists didn't reflect their experiences living under occupation in the West Bank. The band, whose music is reflecting all aspects of daily life Palestinian youth is facing, has a growing and loyal fanbase and has been collaborating with other Palestinian artists from both the West Bank and within Israel.



The members of **Third Eye**, a rap group, just before they're going on stage at a concert in Birzeit. All members of the group are students at Birzeit University but hope to be able to be able to make a living with their music one day. Their lyrics and music are political bracing all aspects of daily life under occupation.



Ala Shalalda is a young musician who studies the violin at the Al Kamandjâti music school in Ramallah. The school first opened in 2005 and is located next door to her home. Her older brother, Shehada, trained to become a violin maker in the UK. Ala practices on the very first violin her brother made daily. Ala has been studying the violin for six years and she hopes to become a professional musician one day.



Ronza Asfour is the owner of Express Nails, a beauty salon in Ramallah. Ronza is a qualified teacher but her passions are beauty and business. She was determined to open her own salon and attended numerous training courses to be able to offer professional treatments ranging from massages to pedicures, manicures and more. Ronza is also the only qualified female tattoo artist in the West Bank.



Faisal Barghouthi is a Palestinian filmmaker, who has been involved with Idiom Films, countless Palestinian short films and features like "Lesh Sabreen" (2009) and "Blued" (2013). Faisal is also a farmer he and his brother inherited from his grandfather. Faisal is passionate about traditional and organic farming methods he's learned from his grandfather growing up as a boy. He's constantly researching new methods and innovations to combine with traditional Palestinian farming methods without compromising the traditional character or heritage of his mixed crop livestock farm near Ramallah.

DAM (Brothers Suhell and Tamer Nafar and Mahmoud Jreri) on stage at a concert at Birzeit University. Dam were among the first to rap in Arabic. Their music is reflecting the realities of Palestinians living both in Israel and the West Bank. They are the voice of a new generation and are extremely popular in the West Bank where they perform often.



David Brunetti is a London based photographer working worldwide, specialising in editorial, portraiture and documentary photography.

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Khaled Barghouthi is a professional dancer and choreographer.

Born in a village near Ramallah, he studied dance in Belgium. He's the first and only professionally trained male ballet dancer from the West Bank. When we met he had just performed at the Ramallah Contemporary Dance Festival and had been invited to take his performance on tour in Europe. He tries to perform in Palestine whenever possible but said due to the lack of opportunities in the West Bank he has to work in Europe if he wants to dance professionally. But whenever Khaled is in Palestine, he teaches dance at the Ramallah Ballet Centre and gives workshops about dance at the Franco-German Cultural Center in Ramallah.