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Leila Abdelrazaq Interview

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Interviewer: Quest Sawyer

Artist: Leila Abdelrazaq

Location: Skype call, Chicago, IL and Detroit, MI

Date: May 18, 2018



Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in Art 200/AAS 2013: Asian American Arts & Culture during Spring Quarter 2018 as part of the Asian American Art Oral History research project conducted by Laura King, Professor Art, Media, & Design

Artist Bio:

Leila Abdelrazaq is a Palestinian author/artist, who was born in Chicago. Her work combines art and activism, addressing topics such as diaspora, refugees, history, memory, and borders. In 2015, she graduated from DePaul University with a BFA in Theatre and BA in Arabic Studies. She is best known for her graphic novel *Baddawi* (April 2015)- a story about her father's refugee experience. Her website (<https://lalaleila.com>) also contains comics and zines, illustrations, and prints she's created based on self-expression and her love of activism. Leila is also the founder of a blog called *Bigmouth Press and Comix*, which creates a platform for women and others of African, Middle East, Muslim, and South Asian (AMMS) decent to attack issue, such as imperialism, gender, sexuality, etc., through their artwork.

Featured Work: *World War 3 Illustrated*, *VICE Magazine*, *The Electronic Intifada*, (PEN America's) *The Illustrated PEN*, *Hyperallergic*, *LA Review of Books*, *Middle East Monitor*, *Your Middle East*, *The Rumpus*, *Salon*, *Jadaliyya Status Hour*, and *The Riveter*.

Awards:

- 2015 Palestine Book Awards for Baddawi (shortlisted)
- 2018 Young Artist of the Year Award (finalist)

Exhibitions:

- Drawing in the Diaspora: Comic Art & Graphic Novels by Leila Abdelrazaq - Arab American National Museum, Dearborn, MI - Nov 2016-April 2017
- Baddawi: Identities in Transit - APEX Gallery at South Dakota School of Mines and Technology, Rapid City, SD - April 2016
- Take Care of Your Self: A transcultural art event - We Are The Medium, Montreal, QC Canada - July 2017
- [Commonwealth: Water For All](#) - The Queens Museum, New York, NY - February-July 2017
- Over the Rainbow: Babycastles x Art Palestine International - Babycastles, New York, NY - March-April 2017
- Arab Comics in the Curriculum: the AUB Libraries' Collection - American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon - March 2016
- Comix Creatrix: 100 Women Making Comics - House of Illustration, London, UK - Feb-May 2016

Interview Transcript:

Quest Sawyer: So, can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Leila Abdelrazaq: Sure. I'm Leila, I'm a Palestinian artist. I was born in Chicago. I went to school in DePaul for undergrad double majored in theatre and Arab studies. And when I was in college my interest was in Palestine, so I did a lot of work with that. While I was at the Theatre School, I sort of got frustrated how white all of the stories were. It wasn't really my idea of creative work I wanted to pursue. So, I started drawing comics instead of doing my own creative projects. In my freshman year as an undergrad, I started a web comic series called *Baddawi*, which ended up being turned into a book. When I started it, it was just a run off on stories and anecdotes my dad told us about growing up in the camps and stuff like all that. When I was doing them, I posted them on my blog and social media and as I continued doing that eventually, through my connections I made as an organizer at FJP [Free Justice for Palestine] with activist around the city and country, got into the hands of a publisher company called Just World Books. They publish books about Palestine and the Middle East. And they were like, "Hey do you want to turn this into a graphic novel?" and I was like, "Yeah, but I don't really know how to write a graphic novel." And they have never published a graphic novel before, so we both were like let's do this and we'll see how it goes and that's how *Baddawi* came to be.

QS: That's really cool, have you traveled Palestine yourself?

LA: I have but none of my family lives there anymore. So, the first time I went I was 18 and I just graduated. It was a program for Israeli and Palestinians where students travel around the world and get free trips to Israel, calling it a birth right. At the same time, some people could be Israeli and Palestinians and they don't have roots in that country. Meanwhile, Palestinians around the world are kept out of the country. My family member who has refugee status was denied because they don't allow refugee identities and they aren't allowed to enter the country. So, the program was basically a response to it saying, "No, Palestinians and Israeli have the right to go back to their home land and see it." And with a US passport I was able to get in. That was the first time and I also went a couple other times after. One time was a special event for literature that brings authors around the world together, where we went to Palestine and had literary events there. Another one was with this Palestine organization that works on literacy in Palestine schools without libraries and they bring authors and they brought me there for my comics based on Palestine.

QS: So, how would you define or categorize your art to someone else who is very new to you as an artist?

LA: I would say my art is comics obviously. It deals a lot with my identity as a Palestinian. It's also dealing with a lot of political and social themes that people might at first think are complicated. Like people always tell me, "why is it so complicated? We can't understand this issue." It's actually not complicated and for me comics are really good because they're more accessible and they break things down and they're not pretentious. You can explain what you believe and people will engage sometimes in what you believe as well. Maybe a little bit activist

in nature in terms of wanting to engage people in what they wouldn't normally engage in, but also that can vary.

QS: Personally, I love your art and how you draw things, to me it's really cool. When did you first become an artist?

LA: I liked drawing since I was kid. And I don't know it just takes a long time to really feel like an artist. I feel like I still have so much to accomplish and improve on because you're always growing an artist and you're always growing as a person. But yeah, I've always loved art.

QS: Now looking at your graphic novel *Baddawi*, can you tell me the meaning of it? Does it have any fictional elements or is it all based on your father's experience?

LA: There's nothing that's made up. Everything that happens in the book is a part of my dad's experience. But even now my dad will tell me stories I didn't even know about when I was working on it and I was like, "why didn't you tell me?!" Things come out when they come out and there were a lot of gaps. Also, memory, especially talking to one person, is so selective and your interruption of an events can change over the course of time and your feelings can change even the course of time. So, I was operating with that understanding and my own interruption of it, looking at which events am I going to put in and which ones am I going to leave out.

Sometimes I would have to rearrange stories, but not historical facts. For example, if it was a trivial story about playing marbles or something, I might've positioned that earlier or later than they actually happened because I was trying to keep a narrative arc through the story. There were some stories that wouldn't fit that I wanted to find a place for. They started as long anecdote on a blog and then you have to find a way to create a narrative arc that captures the issues. And it's kind of hard because your life isn't a narrative arc and stuff happens. So even though I don't write myself into the story, I see the graphic novelist as a character in the story. I come through in the way that I tell the story, like when he [Ahmad] is in the water or having a nightmare, these kinds of things are my visuals. The fact that A.) I didn't experience [this] so I'll never fully know what it was like and B.) I wasn't there, so I try to find photographs. Trying to piece this thing together I know it's not going to be 100% accurate, but I'm not writing for accuracy because I'm writing my dad's experience and the reason I'm writing his story is for political and social issues I'm trying to get across.

QS: Yeah, because even though it wasn't your own experience, you did a very good job of interrupting. I recently read *Baddawi* for the interview and when he [Ahmad] moves from one place and that isn't safe and he moves back home and that place is also not safe. It just feels like a constant spiral of him always trying to look out for himself, even though he has all these people around him that can be taken away in an instant. For example, the butcher and his aunt-in-law, which is very well encompassed, especially with your art. I'm very fascinated with how you draw the armies, which act as the villains of the story. What gave you the idea to have them in a very monstrous manor?

LA: People are always trying to make excuses for these soldiers. We're always supposed to feel bad for these people causing massacres. Why? Because they're white and relatable to people?

When you're writing a graphic novel, especially the wording and text can't just tell the story, the pictures and text are working together. So, I decided I won't use any rhetoric. Like even right now when reporting on what's happening in Gaza, you see headlines of x number of members died. Did those people drop dead? No, they were killed! It's like taking the responsibility away from the Israeli soldier who's killing people. And the style of that rhetoric is a way of forcing the ideology that takes away the responsibility from the Israeli army. So, I thought "Okay, if I'm going to this then there is no room for the other side. I'm responsible for my dad and my dad's story, I'm not responsible for keeping balance." I don't think there's any such thing as keeping balance, it's bullshit. Everybody has their bias and anyone who thinks they're not bias is usually white. Anyway, I just decided I don't care about faces and characters [for the army] because they can speak for themselves. I'm drawing a 10-page comic for a magazine right now and I'm drawing the army the exactly the same because it's a new policy that comes with my work.

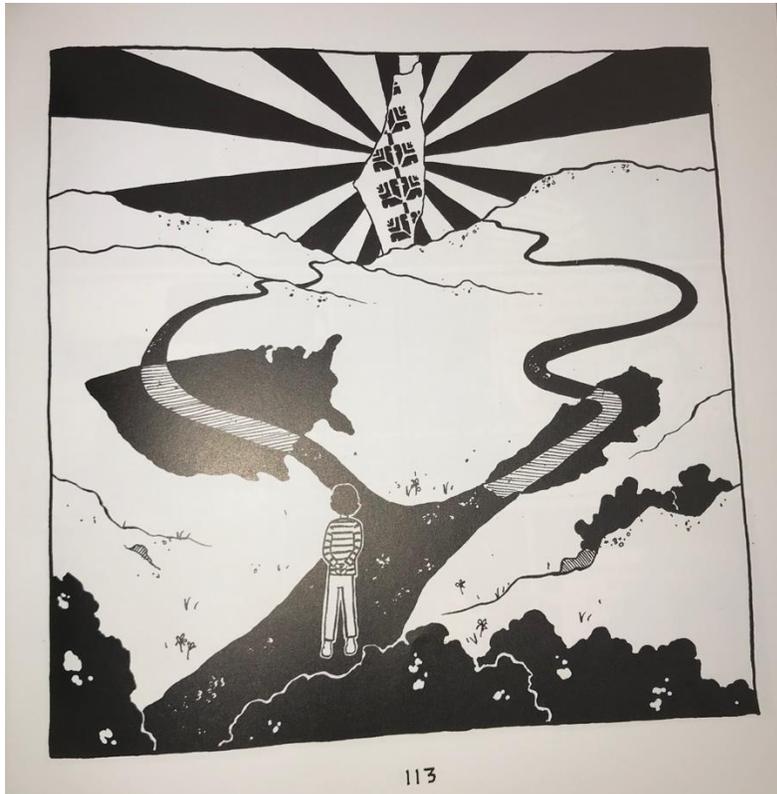


INTERROGATION

Smuggling Books Across the Border: The Electronic Intifada, 2015

QS: That's a very good point because I know everyone wants to be the hero of their own story, but not everyone's story is told and a lot of people that are seen as heroes do not have the light

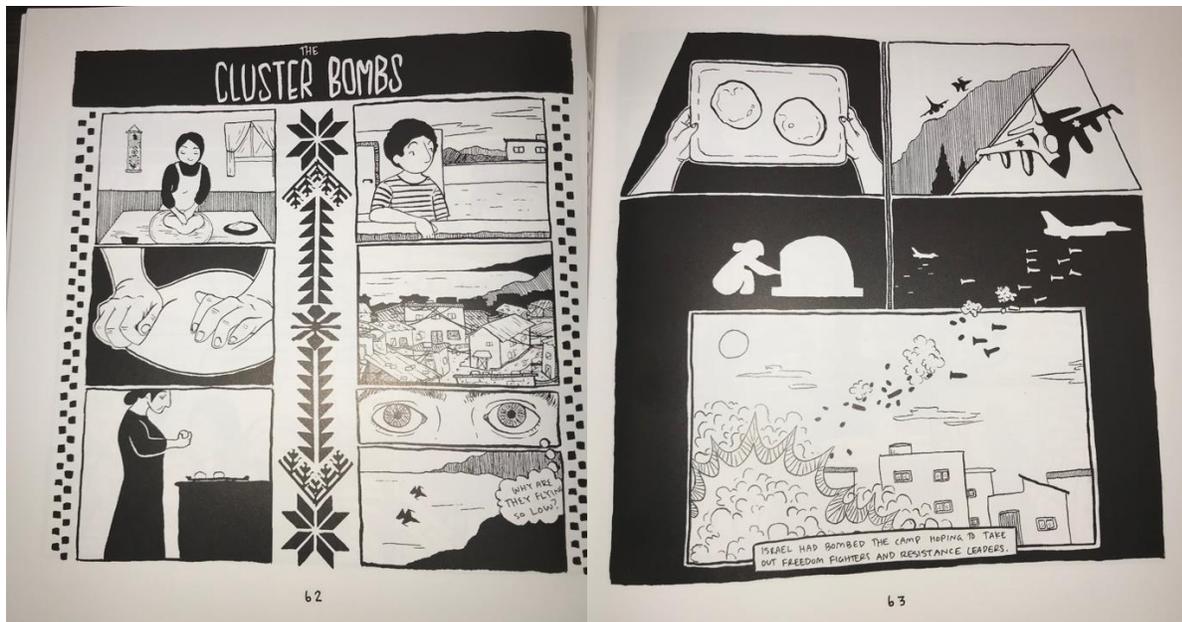
shined on their story enough. I thought the drawings were very interesting and truthful. I'm about to start referencing the book. On page 113, where you draw Ahman two paths of either going to America or staying, do you know the poem by Robert Frost, "The Road Not Taken"? Was that page inspired by that?



Baddawi: Charlottesville, VA, Just World Books, 2015

LA: I wasn't inspired by that poem, but I was trying to communicate was no matter what path he takes neither is the final destination. I didn't want it to be the story of the poor boy with a bad childhood leaves to the United States and lives happily ever after. And so, I wanted people to understand neither of those options is final option for a Palestinian. I wanted to make sure the political message I was getting across was about Palestine.

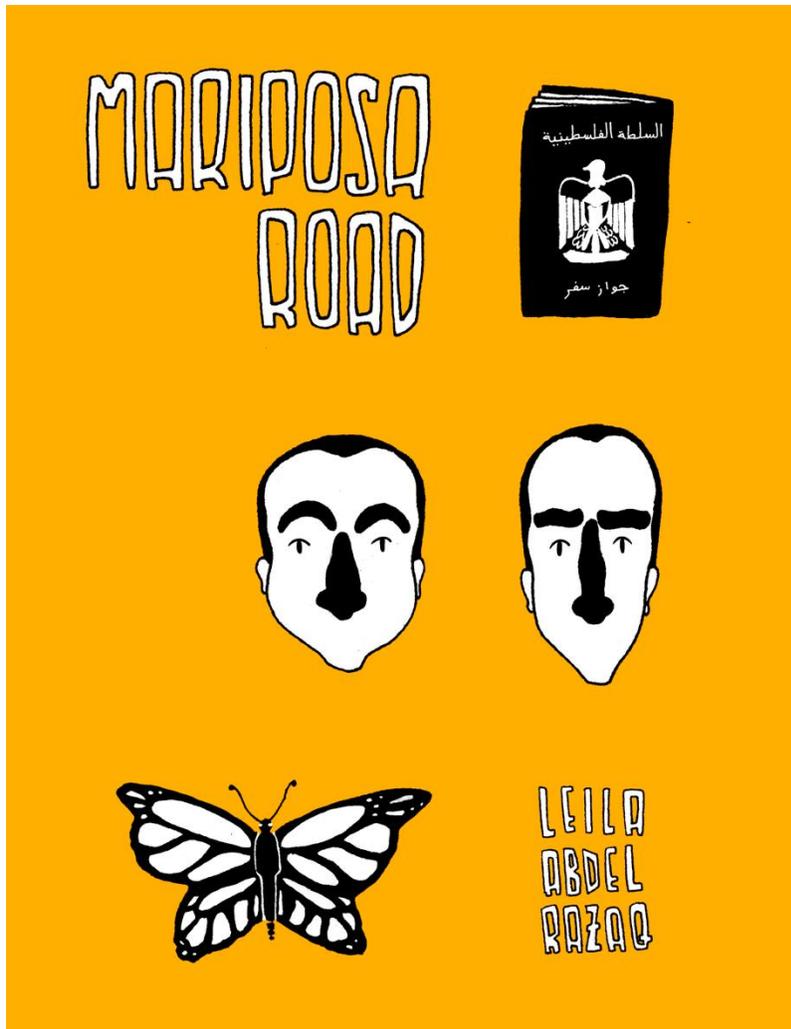
QS: Another part on pages 62 and 63, the Cluster Bomb, the woman is kneading the bread while the bombs are dropping down. What inspired you to tell that story in that way? Because later we learn that it's Ahmad's cousin's wife who died while baking. What made you want to create a side by side image?



Baddawi: Charlottesville, VA, Just World Books, 2015

LA: When I drew this comic, it was still on the blog and I laid it out so it could be read vertically down the page. So, the two stories side by side are separate until they come together at the bottom of the page. And that's how I was thinking about it visually and having them beside each other. I also kind of wanted to capture the way my dad told the story because he would talk about watching the planes and when you see something like that come towards you, not knowing what's going to happen and then you think about all the people you love. The way I show it shows how many people are affected when something like that happens.

QS: The whole drawing made me think of a scene in a movie where you see something and something else happening and you wonder if they're related and then it comes together. Diving into your other work, can you tell me what was happening with the refugees and Palestine in your comic of *Mariposa Road*? Were the characters based off of anyone?



Mariposa Road: The Electronic Intifada, 2016

LA: That comic was based on a true story about two men from Gaza called Mounis and Hisham. They were basically from Gaza and really wanted to leave. But it's very hard to leave, almost impossible. A lot of Palestinians aren't from Gaza, they're actually refugees from other areas in Palestine. It's hard to get clearance to travel even for school, like with scholarships, because they don't belong to a state. Some people are desperate to leave because imagine you're stuck in place and unemployment is so high there. Since a vast majority of people are out of work, how are you supposed to create a future for yourselves? So, they escape Gaza, travel around like refugees do, go to the border, and they're locked up. But the thing about Palestinians is that in order to report to somebody you have to recognize the government for the country that person is from. They can't transport them to Gaza and they don't know where to transport them, so they're holding them indefinitely. And so eventually an activist in Arizona found out that there are these guys who are locked up. So, they try to put a team together to get them out. And that's when they reach out to me, "Hey there are these guys and we don't have photos of them because they're in prison and we can't take photos. Can you make some sort of art to help free them?" I told them, "yeah and I can do a comic," which ended up getting me out to Arizona so I could go to meet with them and talk to them. So now they're both released and have work permits. But it's illegal

for them to hold people like that indefinitely if they don't have anywhere to go. So, they're staying out in the US, but I don't know where. The comic was made to bring awareness of what's going on and help them.

QS: Yeah that story was getting worse and worse because they can't hold them for that long and it's not fair. So, going into the Bigmouth Press & Comix. When, how and why did you first get involved with it? What made you establish the organization?

LA: So, after I wrote *Baddawi* I was getting a lot comments from people and I would see a lot of white people giving me their comments about like Arab and Palestinian issues. And when it came to getting up on panels, I was the only women up there for comics. So, I saw leverage for this situation because there is definitely room for more than just my work at this table. I had been doing it as a blog at first just with a bunch of artists I've found on Instagram that I used as a platform where artist can meet another artist. That's how I got a lot of opportunities meeting other artists and writers supporting my work and giving me opportunities, so I wanted to do that for others and then. After doing the blog for a little while, I wanted to make it bigger and into a whole operation. Also, there are so many great comics coming out of Lebanon and the Middle East right now. They're working out of all over, out of Morocco, Egypt, and everywhere, and people don't even know about it. If people are going to consume work about us, I want them to consume work by us and diverse work, not just one person's voice because we are a diverse people. You get multiple voices and you start to humanize people and you can't reduce them to this idea that they need to be liberated by the American army right now. So just getting a multitude of stores and opportunities using the Bigmouth Press & Comix.

QS: Right, because multiple brains are better than one, especially when it comes to discussing things because you get different views. Also, a diverse platform is always a wonderful thing because you rarely get any diversity anymore.

LA: And now people are starting to notice there are a lot of comics coming out of the Middle East. For example, at this huge famous comic festival, they had a whole exhibit on Arab comic artists this year, which was really cool. But the vast majority of the artist displayed were men and I was like "There are so many women!! And none of them are here!". And I know some people who organize it and one women was pushing more women, but patriarchy is everywhere so it didn't happen. Of course, as people become aware of Arab comics, they're going to become aware of the men first because they're everywhere. It helps to have a platform [Bigmouth Press & Comix] where you can say "You think there are no women? Let me show you this website" and I have profiles of all these people.

QS: Because women are constantly underestimated and it's good to have that platform to be like "Alright this is what women can do." I just find it very very interesting. Moving on to Asian/Asian American identity, do you ever address Asian or Asian American identity, themes, or histories in your artwork?

LA: When I was 11 we moved to Korea I went to middle and high school there and graduated there. So, it's not my heritage' but I do have love and connection with Korea. I wouldn't say I adore it, but I think growing up there has changed how I think about the world. I think that

sometimes when you're in the U.S. you have a closed off view from the world when there are so many other things happening. I don't know but growing up there has really influenced me as a person and as an artist. But no, I haven't used it in my work exclusively, but I know it's a part of me.

QS: That's really cool, so did you only study there?

LA: So, my dad got a job there recently, so we moved there as a family for his job. My dad already picked up and moved to another country once, so why not do it again? Other people may see it as crazy, but I don't think of it as being unusual. I use to be able to speak a little, but I forgot most of it.

QS: I totally understand where you're coming from. What types of exhibition opportunities have changed or stayed the same for you over the years?

LA: My first exhibit was at a university in South Dakota. My second was at the Arab American National Museum and that really opened a lot of doors for me.

QS: Awesome and last question, you touched on this a little bit before, but what are you working on currently?

LA: So right now, I have a couple of big projects that I'm working on. I'm working on a comic right now that's about borders and testing those borders as a Palestinian. And then the second, I'm currently a finalist for the Youngest Artist of the Year Award and it's a big competition that happens every other year. The competition is open to anyone one in the world with a Palestinian background. There are 10 of us in the finals, so we're going to Italy to workshop and what I'm doing is an animated comic that's going to be projected on the wall.

End.