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## LARISSA SANSOUR BRINGS HER SCI-FI VISIONS TO THE TORONTO PALESTINE FILM FESTIVAL

Artist says the genre suits her new films because nostalgia and foreboding suit the Palestinian condition

BY **FRAN SCHECHTER**

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A highlight of NOW's top art show of 2015, **Home Ground**, at the Aga Khan Museum, was Larissa Sansour's *Nation Estate*, a video imagining Palestine as a futuristic high-rise in a cordoned-off zone of Jerusalem. The UK-based artist brings a selection of her sci-fi-inspired films to the Toronto Palestine Film Festival at the TIFF Bell Lightbox from September 22 to 25. [tpff.ca](http://tpff.ca).

**How did you get the idea to present Palestinian issues through science fiction? Are you a fan of the genre?**

No, but it's become harder for me to address the political situation in a straightforward format such as documentary. There's a limit to how long you can steer clear of questioning authenticity in documentary when dealing with a reality that's become stranger than fiction.

The sense of nostalgia and foreboding inherent in science fiction fuses well with the Palestinian condition. Palestinian identity is stuck in a limbo where it always remembers and identifies with the Nakba (the catastrophe of 1948) and at the same time projects the future of a nation state.

This temporality sits very comfortably for me in the sci-fi genre. The past is never separable from the future or the present, and the time lapses that the genre allows enable me to address the many layers of a very complicated identity.

**The pop-culture sci-fi you riff on often says more about contemporary hopes and fears than about the future. What are some of the hopes and fears your work reflects?**

The imaginary sci-fi worlds that I create are never really an escape from reality, but rather a new language for addressing a present that seems to be stuck in a limbo. The sci-fi genre always projects humanity's angst and fears and warns that things will reach catastrophic heights if allowed to continue. This forewarning is present in most of my recent work.

The genre also often underlines the thin line between utopia and dystopia, so it deals with the tension of extremes and the ambiguity of perceived or accepted notions, something that resonates well when addressing the future of Palestine, be it fear of another massive exodus or the erosion of its territories or its people.



**Archaeology currently plays an interesting role the Mideast: in Israel it's used to assert a right to the land, while in Iraq and Afghanistan fundamentalists are destroying pre-Islamic antiquities. How do you use archaeology in your new film?**

In my last film, *In The Future They Ate From The Finest Porcelain*, we follow a rebel leader who calls herself a "narrative terrorist." Her mission is to change the course of history by planting porcelain plates with the Palestinian keffiyeh pattern in the ground for future archaeologists to excavate. These plates function as deposits of a new cultural DNA. The film tries to expose the thin line between fiction and reality and the fact that history does not have to be built on truth. Mythology, more often than not, plays a big role in this war on narrative, and in the case of Israel instrumentalized archaeology is more apparent than anywhere else.

**Lacoste removed Nation Estate from its art prize competition in 2009 for being "too pro-Palestinian." Are you or other Palestinian artists still experiencing censorship in the art world?**

There is always a silent de-selecting rather than censorship. Censorship of course still happens, but what worries me most are not those clear-cut, blatant censorship cases, but how a lot of political artists are just not chosen for certain exhibitions because of what their work addresses.

The more public funding is taken away from art institutions, the more private sponsors have a say in what they want and don't want to get shown. It's an unfortunate development in many countries where we see less support for the arts in recent years. This means that private companies that support the arts make their own demands and perceive artists as advertisers for their own agendas.

*Sansour speaks at OCAD at 6:45 pm on Wednesday (September 21) and presents her films at 7:15 pm September 23 at the Lightbox, where an exhibit of her work also runs during the festival.*

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