

HALAWANI'S WORK
CAPTURES HER SENSE
OF ALIENATION



A STRANGER IN HER FATHER'S LAND

Stylist meets Palestinian photographer Rula Halawani as her haunting new exhibition opens in Dubai

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To view the photographs in Rula Halawani's series *For My Father* is to enter a disturbing dreamscape. Shot in eerie monochrome, unexpectedly dark in some places, unexpectedly light in others, hazy and blurred at the edges as if receding from view, they give the sense of ghost-like memories not quite grasped,

of holiday postcards sent from a parallel universe.

It took almost a year of experimentation to perfect this effect, which was eventually achieved using an infrared lens and several filters. Says Halawani: "I wanted people to look at these pictures and get the feeling that they are old memories, but that there is also something changing, vanishing."

For My Father, which is

currently on display at Ayyam Gallery in Dubai's Alserkal Avenue, was born out of a visit by Halawani and her family to the Palestine-Lebanon border. "We were arguing about a site that we thought we recognised but weren't quite sure because there had been so many changes," she says. "So I decided to do a project about the changes to my memories of Palestine."

Alongside the photographs in the exhibition is a letter written from Halawani to her father, who passed away six years ago. In the letter, she references his last words: 'My God, this life is short. We are just visiting from somewhere else, and now I am returning.' In tribute to her father, Halawani also decided to make a return visit, to the same places her father had taken her as a child in Palestine.

"It was really touching for me to go back to those childhood memories," she says. "My father is in every picture because he took me there first. I felt like I was talking to him; his words were around me as I took the pictures because he used to act as a guide, telling us about each place. I decided to write him this letter, to tell him what has happened and what is happening. My father was a wise and interesting man. He used to say, 'If we don't liberate Palestine, all Arab countries will be devastated like this.'"

For My Father tells a story



PHOTOGRAPHER
RULA HALAWANI

not just of personal loss and childhood memory, a daughter grieving her father, but also one of mourning and remembrance on a national level. Like much of the Jerusalem-based photographer's work, the series documents the impact of the Israeli occupation on Palestine's physical spaces. "There is destruction everywhere because everything that has our [Arabs'] evidence on it, they want to

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erase," says Halawani.

In photographing Israeli-occupied sites for the project, Halawani also came into close contact with new conflicts that she could not have imagined as a child. "It was very emotional shooting pictures on the Palestinian border with Syria," she remembers. "My father took us to Syria in the 1970s, when I was 12 or 13 years old. He told us that part of Syria is occupied by Israel, which was new to me at the time. He took us to the

Golan Heights [Israeli-occupied Syrian territory] and he showed us where Israel was occupying land. I remember telling him that I liked the Syrian side better, that I felt safer and freer there. But when I went back to the same spot as an adult, it was really confusing because I actually felt safer standing on occupied land – on the Syrian side, which was by then at war, I could hear bombing, bombing,

bombing, so clear and so close."

The series, she says, documents not only changes to Palestinian spaces, but also the increasing restrictions on who can and cannot access them. Each image is hauntingly void of human presence. "There is just emptiness," she says. "Because that's really what is happening."

She continues: "When I was a child, there were many Arabs visiting these places. I could chat to the people there in the same language. Returning to

shoot these pictures, I was often the only Palestinian. Now, the dominant language is not Arabic but Hebrew."

One of the pictures is of a depopulated Arab village where her father used to take her to swim amongst other Palestinian children. "When I returned, there were no Arabs," she recalls. "The original people of this land cannot reach it, because of the wall, the checkpoints."

For My Father feels like an elegy, both for Halawani's father and for the land he was so proud of, a land Halawani is, in part, now forcibly estranged from. But while her intent is explicitly political, the artist is keen not to dictate viewers' emotional responses: "Some people feel the emptiness, some people feel nostalgic for the land, some feel very sad, and some just love the technique," she says. "For me, I just want them to see what I feel, to see what is happening."



For My Father is at Ayyam Gallery, Alserkal Avenue, Al Quoz, Dubai, until 3 March 2016; ayyamgallery.com



HALAWANI REVISITED
HOLIDAY SITES FROM
HER CHILDHOOD