

Mary Tuma

Mary Tuma, born in Oakland CA 1961, currently lives and works in Charlotte, North Carolina. Daughter to an American mother of English-Irish descent, and Palestinian father, Tuma developed her interests in sewing at a very early age by her mother's humble uses of a thread. Both sewing for fun, Tuma became a well established artist and professor, earning a BA in Costume and Textile Design from the University of California, and an MFA from the University of Arizona, Tucson.

Living in Cairo, Egypt between the years of 1981-1982, she briefly enrolled at The American University in Cairo, where she then continued towards an apprenticeship in Kerdasa, a small district in Cairo, to learn how to weave tapestries. Found with a familiarity in the art of sewing,

Wall Stories, 2008. Canvas, journal writings, maps, poetry, on tea stained paper, thread, paint, pins. 3' x 1' x .5", Collection of Roland Rae. Photo by Lloyd Wolf.



Homes for the Disembodied. 50 meters of chiffon, thread, wire. Hand sewn. Photo: Courtesy of the Station Museum, Houston, TX, USA Collection of Naim Farhat.

weaving and crocheting, Tuma developed personal interests in the intimacies of her personal journey away from her homeland, motherland, *otherland* of Palestine. Even though Tuma is slightly constrained from the verbal fluency of her language, she associates herself with her American upbringing certainly more than her Arabic *otherness*. However, the issue of Palestine is where her work starts to take form. What was once a thread, a seed, or even a found tricycle; becomes a dress, an organ, a carpet, and an ascendance of tricycles. All made from a diversity of created materials and found objects, Tuma's visual consistencies reflect her personal process of finding nature within her surrounding means.

One of her well renowned projects was *Homes for the Disembodied* in 2000. While living in Jerusalem, Tuma created a sequence of 5 black dresses all connected by a single 50 yards of black silk, folded across 24 feet of ground. Draped from the ceiling to the floor, hanging from the shoulders and neck on a wire, their phantasmal appearance offers an homage to loss and belonging. The loitering displacement of values to her affiliation of identity was maybe one of her most genuine applications to her personal and social integration. It was first shown at Al Wasiti Art Gallery in East Jerusalem, and gained

international applause when exhibited through the Station Museum's then touring exhibition "Made in Palestine" in Houston TX, 2003.

"I made this piece in response to the Israeli laws denying entry to Jerusalem by Palestinians who had been uprooted from the city in the 1948 and 1967 wars. They were not permitted to return to their homes, their city or even to visit holy sites or the graves of their loved ones. I decided to make a work that would offer a space for deceased Palestinians to dwell in spirit form. The piece is an offering to them and my own way of saying that in one form or another these uprooted souls will make their way home... The empty dress is a continuous theme in my work, used to evoke a sense of identity or spirit. In this case, I chose the form to honor the women of Palestine who seem able to cope with any hardship. They are heroic to me and an inspiration."

She transforms the space into an alternate realm of indifference and human interchange. Encouraging the visitor to walk through her work, interact, observe and divulge her multiple sequences of thoughts and feelings initiated through her partial roots, Tuma in no way dictates her views through her work, and instead investigates concerns to placements and replacements of life after death, after life after death. An ongoing turmoil and trauma is applied to each and every project, as the mourning continues towards the lives lost, and the lives found over a territorial dispute with no endings.

Tuma's *Wall Stories* is a wall installation which acts as a right of entry to the forbidden. A document that no longer serves as a passport, but occupied within its governing content, observe written compositions of corruptions, which according to the exhibition text, are ironic and humiliating. Tuma realizes the importance of borders, barriers and the restrictions of space by occupying the walls with words without meaning.

"... particularly as they relate to Palestine/Israel after the building of the apartheid wall. With this piece I am considering how the complexities of human stories become severed and dissipated into non-reality through the lack of connection. The text on the pages is from my travel journals, the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, and maps that are

severed or give little sense of orientation. Most of the text is indecipherable or incomplete, and yet, the works make up "wholes" of their own."

Unsanctioned documents and disoriented charts grant the politics of absence within presence. Tuma's *Wall Stories* offer a lack of acknowledgement to the Palestine/Israel conflict in question, and overly exposes through the media's upheavals what can only prescribe demands of social control over the removal of a cultural coexistence.

For Tuma's latest project *Internal Systems 3*, the third of a series being worked on since c. 2002, she relays the sensibility of internal emotions found from within our personal thought constructs. Accessing a series of human traumas, whether at the level of a heart attack or 9/11, Tuma provides less than 100 crocheted organs (fewer than what was made in *Internal Systems 1* and 2), in a very interpretive way, externalizing a variety of feelings into abstract organic shapes. The first installation of *Internal Systems* was in 2003. Variant pieces of life-sized organs hung in response to the space it was exhibited in. Tuma worked on three variants of systems, and responded to this final structure with a linear sensibility, heading towards the ceiling, each work reflected spatial renewal.

Working now in her studio, she is materializing new visual constructs to a carpet made out of olive seeds and date seeds. Emblems to her partial homeland, yet full crests to her compassionate closeness of a people in an evermore state of diaspora.

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Internal Systems 3, 2009/2010. As shown at The Green Hill Center for North Carolina Art, Greensboro, NC, USA, through March 26th. Variable dimensions. Crocheted ribbon, yarn, string. Collection of the Artist.

