Autumn 2023 Exhibitions Opening Conversation

Conversation with exhibiting artists Sahar Khoury, Jumana Manna, and Harold Mendez on August 23, 2023, exploring the many dimensions of contemporary sculpture.

This transcription is provided as a record of the live conversation, for educational use.
Read more about the Wexner Center for the Arts' Mission, Vision, and Values.

Transcript

Dionne Custer Edwards (00:10:40):

Hello, how's it going? I love that you're here. Thank you for coming out tonight. I'm Dionne Custer Edwards, head of Learning & Public Practice here at the Wexner Center for the Arts. I use she/her pronouns and my dark brown hair is pulled back into a bun. I'm wearing a black blazer and a white dress, silver shoes.

(00:11:05):

I'm joining you from the Wexner Center for the Arts, just outside the exhibition galleries, which have been transformed by the work of Jumana Manna, Harold Mendez, Sahar Khoury. We hope you'll return tomorrow because that's when you'll get to see the exhibitions at our public opening, which begins at 6:30 PM. Wex advocate members are invited to preview the shows at 5 PM. Then from 6:30 PM to 9:30 PM, the galleries open to the public. There will be small bites, a cash bar, a set with DJ Trueskills, plus food trucks with Zaki Grill and Graeter's Ice Cream on the plaza outside.

(00:11:44):

Now, before we begin, I'd like to acknowledge and thank our supporters. Learning & Public Practice programs are made possible by the American Electric Power Foundation, Huntington, the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation and the Big Lots Foundation. Exhibitions programs are made possible by Bill and Sheila Lambert, Carol and David Aronowitz, the Crane Family Foundation, and Mike and Paige Crane.

(00:12:09):

Before I introduce the panel, I want to invite everyone to grab a snack in the cafe area during the program, and feel free to grab a drink at the cash bar. I want you to just feel like you can get up and move and just not be sort of stuck in your seat and like, "I can't move." Just get up and do what you need to do. Take care of yourselves. Restrooms are around the corner.

(00:12:35):

After the discussion, we'll have time for a few questions from the audience and you can raise your hand and we'll find you with the microphone. But you can also text us on the Wex hotline. I'm going to give you that number. It's (614)-813-3416. One more time, (614)- 813-3416. Text us, and you don't have to wait until the end. You could text us during the program, and then we'll have a whole line of texts ready to go when it's time for the Q&A.

(00:13:15):

So now I'll introduce our exhibition artists. Sahar Khoury was trained as an anthropologist and worked for years on community-based research projects concerning structural vulnerability

within Latinx migrant labor communities. Based in Oakland, California, she developed her practice in the Bay Area's queer community during the late-1990s and early-2000s, making works for music shows, theater performances, and street protests. In the Bay Area, Khoury has exhibited work at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, where she was the recipient of the SECA Art Award, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Oakland Museum of California, Wattis Institute, Berkeley Art Museum, and Pacific Film Archive, and diRosa Center for Contemporary Art. Her work is in the collections of the deYoung Museum in San Francisco and BAMPFA and SF MoMA.

(00:14:13):

Jumana Manna is a visual artist and filmmaker whose work explores how power is articulated, focusing on the body, land and materiality in relation to colonial inheritances and histories of place. She has exhibited at venues including the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp; Mercy Union, Toronto; and SculptureCenter, New York, among others. Manna's work is held in public and private collections internationally, including the Museum of Modern Art, MCA Chicago, Centre Pompidou, and Le Carré d'art, Nîmes, France. I just botched my French, but I did my best. National Museum of Norway and Sharjah Art Foundation, United Arab Emirates.

(00:15:12):

Harold Mendez has had solo exhibitions at Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, Miami; Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, University of Chicago, among others. He also participated in *Being: New Photography* at the Museum of Modern Art and the 2017 Whitney Biennial. He has held artist residencies at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, Light work, Syracuse, New York, and Cross Currents Artist Exchange through the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation International Connections Fund, Havana Cuba. Our moderator is the Wexner Center's Head of Exhibitions, Kelly Kivland. Please join me in welcoming Kelly, Jumana, Sahar, and Harold.

Kelly Kivland (00:16:08):

Hello. Okay. Oh, here I am. Hi everyone... [mic muted] Mic here and there. Okay. Okay, there we are. Hopefully this will stay. Thanks, Dionne. I'm Head of Exhibitions... We are shorting... Nothing.

Jumana Manna (00:16:50):

Hello?

Kelly Kivland (00:16:57):

Take two. Hi. Thanks everyone for coming this evening. It's really fantastic to see such a full room. And thanks to our Learning & Public Practice team, Dionne, Emily Haidet. So many more to thank, and visitor services, our advancement team. It's just fantastic to see so many of you here and joining us for tonight's conversation.

(00:17:22):

I am Kelly Kivland, Head of Exhibitions, she/her pronouns. I have a bob, a dark blonde bob, and a bright blue shirt on. Before I begin the conversation, each of the artists are going to speak a bit more about their own exhibitions. Bring us into the work that's going to be on view for the

opening tomorrow, which I all hope you return to see and join us at. So we'll begin with you Jumana, and then we'll be moving on to Harold and then Sahar. And then I'm going to open up a conversation amongst all of us and then we'll begin with the Q&A that Dionne mentioned. And don't worry, I will give you that hotline number again, just in case you forgot.

(00:18:11):

I think that's all. I'm going to begin, just so we can get started. I will advance slides as we're going along and don't worry, we'll be repeating the slideshow during the conversation, too. Okay. We'll begin with Jumana.

Jumana Manna (00:18:27):

Thank you, Kelly. Hello everyone. Very nice to be here with you all and very glad to be here with Kelly, Sahar, and Harold. So my name is Jumana Manna. I go by she/her. I have brown skin, curly brown hair. I'm wearing a snake-skin, brown shirt, black jeans, and black shoes. So yeah, I'll jump into the show. The exhibition, the title of my exhibition is *Break, Take, Erase, Tally*. On view are two films, two feature-length films around 65 minutes each, and a series of sculptures, different bodies of sculptures that speak to one another but have also existed independently. So when you first walk into the space, there is ceramic sculptures of rotting bread that speaks to a tradition of not throwing away bread even when it's gone stale or old. That's particularly present in the Mediterranean, but I think is present in different cultures and religions all over the world, as bread is very often a stand-in for life. And so, it's about the kind of pleasure and displeasure of looking at rotting bread, the kind of abjectness of bread once it starts to become inedible that, in fact, is a signifier of an ethics of a community of some kind, of not wasting food or not wasting life, and is an act of generosity of leaving the bread out for somebody else or something else to eat it.

(00:20:08):

And as you walk through the space, you arrive to larger-scale sculptures also made from ceramics that speak to traditional silos that were built into village homes in Palestine and across the Eastern Mediterranean. These are structures that are completely obsolete since refrigeration, so over about 100 years, but can be found sometimes in crumbling forms in old village houses and... Sorry? Oh yeah. So, they're departing from the original form of the khabya to kind of prioritizing their fragmented form, their form as a ruin, as a memory of a different way of living, a different relationship to land and architecture. And as a reminder perhaps of also different ways of relating to seeds, to preservation, to community relations that are more cyclical and are based on annual sustenance rather than accumulation and capital growth—that is what contemporary storage and logistics systems are normally associated with. So, these forms that are anthropomorphic, they're creaturely and architectural, bodily… are exhibited on metal plinths and cinder blocks. So, these platforms that are foundations of some kind thinking both of architectural foundations, but maybe also foundations of ideologies of a different kind of modernist ideology of categorization and preservation that are much more based on grid systems, segregation, categorization, taxonomies. So, it's a kind of contrasting of different systems of preservation, specifically tied to seeds, which I explore also in the film, *Wild Relatives*, but also preservation of life at large of biological life and culture.

(00:22:11):

So, in the Reading Room there is this body of this work, which is called *Cache* from the *Cache* series. It's the traditional storages or the khabyas stored on industrial storages. So, a kind of onion-like structure of storing storages that, again, is explored in the films in the history of seed

banking. So I don't know if many of you're familiar with what seed banks are, but they're basically walk-in closets for seeds, many, many bags of seed varieties that are vacuum-packed into aluminum and preserved for biodiversity, but also for the production of new, modern, hybrid seeds by agricultural research institutes. So they're kept in minus-eighteen degrees. So, it's a highly controlled way of preserving and taking care of seeds that belongs also to the history of industrial agriculture which ...

(00:23:09):

I think I'm running out of time, so, okay. So, yeah, so *Wild Relatives*, which is exhibited next to the *Cache* series in the Reading Room, the first smaller room when you walk in is looking at the reconstruction of a seed bank, one of the most important seed banks that used to be based in Aleppo, Syria, that was damaged with the Syrian war. And the institution decided to relocate to Lebanon, which is just across the border, a few hours away. But they couldn't take the seed bank with them and decided to reproduce the seed bank from copies, so from duplicates of these seeds that were stored in the Arctic in something called the global seed vault, the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. And I was interested in this really strange journey of seeds that would've traveled from Syria all the way up to the Arctic and back to neighboring Lebanon and the immense amount of labor that goes into the reproduction of the seed bank.

(00:24:10):

So, yeah, the film speaks to many things but very broadly is thinking around the question of Syria and the histories of agriculture, land dispossession, dictatorial regimes, and their relationship to agricultural research institutes and the funding of a kind of approach to agriculture that prioritizes, again, growth— financial growth over farmers' livelihoods and well-being—Yeah. So, from there, I went on to make *Foragers*, which is my most latest film, which is on view that's also looking at the question of preservation but this time not about seeds and agriculture but about plants and foraging. So, foraging is quite different tradition from agriculture that's based on cultivation and a lot of labor that goes into producing food, foraging is collecting food in the wild. So, food that's already growing without humans, let's say, tending to the plants and the crops but are growing in the landscape.

(00:25:20):

And it's looking specifically at the criminalization of foraging practices in Palestine, Israel, by the Israeli Nature and Parks Authority who have red-listed a few plants that Palestinians happen to enjoy eating and collecting and that is za'atar and 'akkoub. Za'atar is a spice similar to oregano, 'akkoub is a thistle that tastes a little bit similar to artichoke. And again, the plants are at the center of the film and all of the relations are circling around the plants, and it's looking at the persistence of these foraging traditions despite the criminalization of the practice and how the criminalization or, let's say, in this case, nature protection comes to be an extension of policing, of settler colonial rule of the occupation of Palestine but I think, again, relates to much more global histories of how the greening of certain things or greenwashing sometimes goes to serve power—financial power, state power, corporate power that uses the excuse of nature protection for perhaps, yeah, again, for financial gain and control. So, maybe I'll stop there for now and we continue through conversation.

PART 1 OF 4 ENDS [00:23:04]

Kelly Kivland (00:26:48):

Great. I'm going to try my mic again, great. I wanted to also just bring you in a little bit because tomorrow, again, is the opening but each of the exhibitions was really considered as a suite of three solo exhibitions. And so, sorry, Jumana's work is in our upper galleries as well as Sahar's and then in the lower two galleries is Harold's exhibitions just to bring you in visually as we're walking through the galleries here in our conversation. So, Harold's exhibition is titled *one way to transform or two or three* and, Harold, you're welcome to bring us into yours.

Harold Mendez (00:27:37):

Hello. Well, I just want to thank Kelly and the entire staff here and the crew and, being in exhibition with the two of you, it's been really wonderful to see the relationships materially and just we've had a lot of overlap in really interesting ways. And so, I also want to thank everyone for being here and all those who came from out of town, so really excited to share the new work with you. So, yes, the exhibition is called *one way to transform and two and three* ... Oh, actually, I forgot. I'm Harold Mendez, artist, a male, he/him. I have black hair or maybe salt and pepper by this point, a beard, I have a black and white printed shirt, black pants. Thank you for being here.

(00:28:25):

So, the exhibition is a combination of work from the last two to three years so it's all relatively new. There's a lot of new work that was commissioned for this exhibition, specifically, and it ranges between two galleries. So, there's a work in sculpture, cast bronze, new work in ceramic, porcelain, photographic-based work and some installation and some very site-specific work. So, there's a real range of exploration between sculpture and image-making that moves from really intimate, scaled work to really large-scale work like this blue one here you see a detail of. This is actually one of the works that I made specifically for the exhibition which is titled *By which to be embodied*. And so, what you're looking at here is this large-scale field of this blue, looks very topographical or almost celestial, if you will. It has almost like this caustic indigo, very painterly process on the surface so, there's a lot of detail. And then on top of that are a series of carpenters rulers that are used for measuring that fold in and out onto themselves.

(00:29:41):

And essentially this is a work that is dealing with the mapping of my parents' migration from Latin America into the US, and that constant back and forth and really thinking about, not just the mapping or thinking of the measuring device of that migration, but also thinking of those points of connection where, for instance, I'm referencing South America and Colombia, where my mother's from then Mexico, where my father's from and then having a life in United States as well as those three points being a constellation in which I think of what embodies my understanding of myself and my sense of place in the world. And so, I wanted to make a work that could function both as a map and as a constellation, if you will. And so, I think there's a lot of really rich material significance in this work for me and ... I think there's this thing that I think that a lot of artists do as we're, at least specifically for myself, is really thinking about my sense of belonging and my relationship and trying to measure that in some way, not just in the specific place and the locality where I'm from, but the things that continually inform my work.

(00:31:04):

This is another work that was a long time making, this is called *Mundos*. What you're looking at here are these cast sculptures in stoneware, terracotta, and porcelain and "mundos" means "worlds" in Spanish, for those who might be curious about that. And the way that I made them is this really long process of essentially placing these sacred objects or these symbolic objects into

each bundle, no one knows what's in them except me, and I take documentation of them, of course. And that's what gives the object its shape, if you will. And so, the outside is coated in either clay or terracotta and then, when that's fired in the kiln, all of those organic materials and those symbolic offerings are burned out so, essentially, what's left inside of them are ashes so they function as these urns.

(00:32:06):

And for me they had this idea of the sacred and thinking about not just what historically is represented in terms of the relationship. For instance, looking at Aztec or Mayan codices or manuscripts, you often see representations of these kinds of offerings whether they're symbolic or whether they're paying tribute or they're for commemoration and really thinking long in terms of that historical arc of how materials that can be an everyday offering and then in relationship to something that can be very sacred can also function in the same way. And so, for me, they represent this embodiment of exchange of value of the everyday and also the sacred, of course. And when you look at them, they have all the details and all the folds and the fabrics and the very, almost minute detail of what you would expect when you see actual fabric. So, essentially, you're looking at a version of the thing itself that's been burned out.

(00:33:16):

And then you'll see works like this. This is from my last exhibition in Los Angeles. So, you'll see a range of works, for instance, on the wall, really meticulously hand-cut material that starts off as a photographic process and then moves on to a more kind of painterly aspect where, in the front and the foreground, you have these sculptural objects that have this other relationship with this idea of gathering and placing these objects that have that sacred and thinking about ritual and death and thinking about how an object like a headrest, what you see in the center there, that black object. From a distance, when you encounter it, it looks like silk or satin but, in fact, it's actually cast in bronze and other objects have these. I think that's one thing that you will notice in the exhibition as you move through it. One thing appears one way and it's actually something else and that is a real material anchor in a lot of my work and I think that that carries over in a really interesting way across all of us.

(00:34:27):

And then, of course, I'm really excited about this, this is a new work. Am I running out of time here? Okay, I'm going to finish up with this. This is called *Seeking Psychopomps* (their going with our going), which is we are looking at our two ... This is actually a photograph, it's a lithograph but I took a photograph of the sign of these missing Mexican hairless dogs which are very important symbolically in Mexico, specifically to the Aztecs, and they were these dogs that were thought to help guide the dead into the underworld. And so, their eyes are glowing when you see them up close and they're situated on the ramp. So, I like this idea of that, as you're moving up and down the ramp, these dogs are guiding you or they're with you in some way. And there's a lot of these, I think, I would say, in these moments of punctuation so sometimes the sculptures punctuate the actual space, and then other times there are moments where you'll see animals or objects like walrus skins that do the same thing in various ways. So, yeah, thank you.

Kelly Kivland (00:35:45):

Thank you, Harold. Sahar?

Sahar Khoury (00:35:49):

Hello.

Kelly Kivland (00:35:53):
You can give the title of your exhibition, too, because I haven't yet.

Sahar Khoury (00:35:56):
Okay. Hello, everyone. Echo everything that everyone said, so happy to be here and be with these guys. The title of my exhibition is *Umm*, "umm" actually in Arabic. There are many words for mother, I believe, in Arabic, but it's referencing a very well-known Egyptian singer, Umm Kulthum is the inspiration for the title, but it's where I started with it but I think it has come to reference many mothers in a way. And my ... Sorry, my pronouns are she/her, they/it, my hair is blonde right now and I'm wearing a brown shirt and black pants. I think I'll talk about this work, we're really going to be processing it together tomorrow if you all show up because it's very fresh. It's commissioned all new work specifically for the Wexner and specifically for Gallery D, where I am all in the past year through many conversations with the curator, Lucy Zimmerman, over a year about how to put on this show together that comes in parts and arrives here and, with this amazing crew, we put it together.

(00:37:35):
So, it's really ... Haven't even looked at it, really, alone in that space yet, but I'm going to try to take you just physically through this space. What you're looking at are slides photographed of the work, in parts, in a very photographic setting. But what you'll be seeing when you first walk up the ramp, you'll be confronted with a 20-foot-tall sculpture that is called *The Radio Tower* and is made mostly of steel and I work with found materials. So, maybe some of you will recognize if you have kids, this plastic children's activity gym that is this square building unit that inspired me, which is how I work is finding very mundane, ubiquitous objects that are out in my surroundings and use them to help transform and use different symbols on top of that material.

(00:38:44):
So, the tower… I think it's best to describe it as it's a radio tower that will tell time in various ways. It has a bell that has been removed off the top of it, a 36-inch bell, and has been brought down to the ground and no longer functions as a bell. It has found radios that are inside of animal cages and that, on the hour, will have ... Actually a tie, I think, with Harold, my Aunt Layla singing a song with one side of my family's relatives in Arabic, collectively singing at a family party from the '90s. So, very personal things that I'm drawing from and then also, hopefully, merging them with found items to create, I don't know, this tower has become, you guys, this thing that I feel like is a symbol of my family coming here and grappling with what this place is. And so, it's dense and it's vulgar and it's beautiful and it's also very porous so you can really see through it. And I'm not looking for you to love it, I'm looking for you to really experience it or think that it's beautiful. I'm looking for you to think about how it makes you think about being in America and where you're from.

(00:40:41):
And then, I'll just roughly talk… maybe the slide that's up now that's a standalone sculpture that actually, I think, crosses with Jumana's work about a foraged spice, sumac, that is used in many regions of what we call the Middle East, traditionally put on rice and on kebabs. There is a kebab hanging on it, you'll see, it's ceramic. So, I cast ... Yeah, we work very similarly and dissimilarly with our materials so there's casting in bronze, there's casting in ceramic. I don't

think there's an image of the kebab wind chime but you'll find that there will be a kebab wind chime when you walk in there of three different actual kebabs that I got from places that I eat in the Bay Area. I'm half Iranian, half Arab so these kebabs will actually be Iranian and I cast those in porcelain or in plaster and slip cast them. So, they're actually the texture of this kebab because it's very difficult to actually craft the kebab well unless you're a kebab master.

(00:41:58):

So, I think there's a lot of reverence that we have, I think, as a group here for food, clearly, and for the idea of food deeply, deeply connecting you to your family and your history and, yeah, to all the political turmoil that comes with that, too. So, this show is just really about that. There's a huge suite of numbers, cast—or not cast, forged in steel. That's the other very large work that you're seeing snippets of in these slides when it comes back up, that. Those numbers are my height, they're made of hollow pipe. I learned to forge for this, I mean forge very elementally where I pounded it with a hammer and heat-treated the numbers, and then they're all placed on these found and manipulated bases so that they can hold the numbers. And I don't know what to… This is… you'll see various dates there that, when I first did this piece in paper-mache over 10 years ago, I was interested in dates that also were what led me here and what led my family here and that happened to be important dates in the Middle East, again, what we call the Middle East.

(00:43:27):

So, dates like 1948, the Nakba, 1979. But to me, it doesn't really matter what the dates are, it's really more of an island of time and a span that is just talking about how ... Now, one important date is obviously always related to so many other things that preceded it, so it's really about ... The show is about abstracting food culture and love, I guess, and that's all I'll say.

Kelly Kivland (00:44:01):

Thank you, all. We've had the great privilege of having all of the artists with us over the last, well, several weeks. Different durations for each of them but it's been a real pleasure to be able to see the work evolve, to commission all of this new work, which is fantastic, and also just to gain a sense of each other's practice. I want to make sure also, while I'm leading this conversation, I want to make sure to acknowledge the two other curators that work tirelessly on these exhibitions. So, Sahar mentioned Lucy Zimmerman, curator here at the Wex who has been, for years, even over years, been working with Sahar on visualizing and realizing this exhibition. And Danny Marcus, associate curator here, helped to realize the Wex's installation of Jumana's exhibition. Jumana's exhibition originated at PS1, was curated there by Ruba Katrib, and Danny helped to realize the work in an expanded exhibition here at the Wex.

(00:45:18):

I'll begin, how's that? So, as you can see ... I'm still looking forward to everyone's questions, but I'm going to ask a few and open up conversation with the artists. I hope you gained a sense of each of the exhibitions a bit and you can probably even see some of the intersections but I'm going to let the artists speak for themselves. Materiality is something that is very prevalent and present in each of the exhibitions and, obviously, the transformation, as well, of objects'—whether found or repurposed— language. I would love for you to bring us into specifically, really, the materiality and thinking here more about maybe around sculpture, but you can extend that conversation if you'd like—

(00:46:03):

You can hear more maybe around sculpture, but you can extend that conversation if you'd like and even speak to if sculpture is a useful term for you. But maybe I'm looking at Harold. Harold, would you like to bring us into what materiality means to you, how you approach the transformation of the work as you were speaking about it in the slides?

PART 2 OF 4 ENDS [00:46:04]

Harold Mendez (00:46:22):

Yeah, I think that in the studio, I think what's at least one thing that I'm really looking for consistently is expanding what I'm doing, not just doing the same thing over and over and learning something new. And I think part of that's working in sculptural… like working at a foundry and then really, kind of, pivoting and working in ceramics and porcelain that I have no full grasp of materially. But that's the goal is to kind of make something new that I haven't made before and really try to figure out how to create something within my practice that is still dealing with similar subject matter and content, but it's just represented in a very different way. The exhibition is actually—I mentioned it was titled, *one way to transform and two and three*, which is one of the works—it's one of the smallest works in the exhibition.

(00:47:20):

And they're made from these cornmeal cakes. They're called arepas in Spanish that my mom and I sort of collaborated on. She made them, and the story is with this work in particular is they're very circular, they're very thin, but they sort of represent these kind of moons for me. And I think the work came out of this other kind of form of transformation. So just to kind of give you a short description of how that work came to be... In the nineties, at the time, this was right before I started sixth grade, I was in Columbia with my family. One of my cousins had been essentially assassinated by the cartel through mistaken identity. And that following school year, we're back in Chicago. Generally, when you start the first day of class, the teachers write about your summer or what you experienced. So here I was, this sixth-grader having all this trauma that didn't know how to deal with.

(00:48:31):

And so I decided to write about the thing that made me the most happy, which was how my mom made arepas. And so I went through this kind of description of what an arepas was and how she made them, and just seeing the total transformation materially of a thing that sustain me. So for me, it's not a thing that is about death, per se, or mourning, but somehow that experience of losing a family member and then having this moment of trying to describe something that would sustain me. So it's this other kind of form of embodiment or this other kind of body sustenance, if you will. And then the process of understanding all that into a work. And so I'm describing how that work came to be. But when you look at it, essentially what I did was I asked my mom to make these arepas and generally when she visits me, she brings me some, which I love her for.

(00:49:26):

And I had this impulse, and it's not necessarily an intellectual thing, it was really this… really, kind of, emotional impulse to adorn them with silver leaf, kind of like gold leafing. And for me, when I would see her make them and she would put them on the comal, which is a skillet, if you will, and she would cook them, they would sort of look like these kind of moons. And so, I just had this image in my head that I wanted to have that work represent that. And so that's one of the works that very poetically, for me, at least, sort signifies a lot of these different kind of

experiences. And so, that, for me, is a real, kind of, way of thinking about materiality from something that's really far back from a kind of personal to a thing that really is in line with my subject matter and the things that I really explore in my work.

Kelly Kivland (00:50:20):

Thanks, Harold. Jumana, in terms of the references that come forth for you with materials and materiality, thinking here about agriculture, urban architecture, things that you've referenced even in the beginning of the conversation, you can bring us into the food as well, but I'm really curious how you approach materiality even in your films, if you don't mind.

Jumana Manna (00:50:46):

Yeah. So maybe I start from the back of the question. Is sculpture a relevant term? I would say yes. I think I even have in some way a classical ceramic sculptural practice and that my sculptures kind of deal with repetition, space, scale, rhythm, things that are just really central in what sculpture is and can do, I think, in relation to the encounter with the body in a space. And a lot of the processes are driven by materials. So it is a material practice and a process-based material practice. So, I am usually drawn to certain things, objects, materials, usually things that are left behind or cast off or overlooked. And I photograph them, I draw them over many months until I understand what it is I want to do with them. And then I start making, and usually the first generation of what I make is okay, but it gets better.

(00:51:54):

And so, this is why I often work in series because it's only through making something that I understand the form and where I want to go with it. Yeah. So that's what I mean. And it being not a conceptual practice, even though I'm dealing with theory, ideas, political, economic questions, but it's a making practice that is informed by these interests, but really happens once that process begins.

(00:52:22):

And then I'm interested in materials and their histories. So there's my process, but then there's also the histories of their material, their kind of economic, social, political function, how certain materials or crafts, let's say. There's a lot of interest in craft, I think, in my work from casting, so artistic crafts, but also ceramics, that's one of the most ancient crafts, and how these crafts have also in a way suffered but endured colonial modernity. And then, how they continue to live on or have found ways to live on as also communities have. And I never present objects on traditional plinths. I really dislike white plinths. I don't think I've ever used them. So I'm always interested in how objects almost have a social and mobile life. So very often when I present sculptures again, they'll be shown differently from one space to the other. They're not fixed forms. I think that I treat them like bodies that also travel like we do and change clothes and positions and postures depending on where they go. Yeah. So, I don't know. Maybe I can leave it at that. Yes.

Kelly Kivland (00:53:41):

That was great. Sahar.

Sahar Khoury (00:53:50):

I was just kind of thinking about how last night when us three were talking, we were… immediately went to, "How did you make that?" Before, we weren't talking to each other the way

we're talking to you right now. It was way more about how you... Yeah, what kind of process did you use on this? And so, I think of materiality that way and I just love the process. I'm like Harold, too, where the numbers I had made in paper mache and then with sculpture, you're contending with all of the wonderful and horrible things of sculpture, dealing with it traveling and the risk of loss and how do you get it to stand and not kill someone. And so, I think that leads to the next desire. And I don't seek too hard, I will be honest. I'm definitely someone who wants to live in the environment that I'm in and deal with what I have access to, which is why I do cast things and make sort of transform, let's say a pita, which you'll see from the bread to the clay form or the Sumac.

(00:55:13):

But in another sense, like in the bed that keeps repeating, I definitely find a collaboration with the found object and the beauty and the lived experience of it. I just feel that incorporating it in with parts that I fabricate has... I'm, sort of, very interested in material sometimes mimicking one another and then sometimes obscuring, not in a trickery way, but where you're not exactly sure what you're looking at. And then sometimes where, like Jumana's bread that's sculpted to look so moldy, it's amazing. And then my bread that was soda fired, which is a process in ceramics that's an atmospheric firing that then suddenly this process is what creates its texture. I'm just so thrilled by all the different ways that you can arrive at this object and what you see. And honestly, yeah, maybe I'll just leave it at that. I could go on about material forever.

Jumana Manna (00:56:26):

I just want to share our enthusiasm of both having made ceramic bread. We were very excited to see that we both have ceramic pita breads in the show you're going to see tomorrow.

Sahar Khoury (00:56:39):

Like Harold's real bread, that was silver leafed, which we discovered last night. So yeah, when do you decide to sculpt it? When do you decide to cast it? When do you decide to use it, and cover it up? When do you not cover it up? Those are all the fun sculpture... Become sculptors, we need more of it. They're closing down everywhere, the departments. But anywho, this department is amazing. I visited it today. But yes, so sculptures, that's all I'll say.

Harold Mendez (00:57:13):

I also like that there's this relationship with all the exhibitions and that something that is ephemeral as bread, how we're attributing so much value to that thing and how it has a continual importance in everyone's... I mean, just kind of on a daily level, but also just in terms of how it makes its way in and out of the work. And what's also really interesting is these things are also universal. They're specific to each one of us in our own relationships with it, but that they're also very universal. I think someone's going to see your kebab chandelier and it's great and someone's going to see your work and the landscape of this, kind of remnants of the food and have a relationship I think, I hope, in these kinds of ways that is really interesting materially, but then also... Yeah, I find it to be very generous, not just in terms of the sustenance and the materiality, but just in terms of its importance globally. Right?

Kelly Kivland (00:58:21):

I'm glad you brought up the universality of the work. And really, when we were the curators together, we were all having conversations around the suite of exhibitions. Some of these overlapping themes and even materials that we're talking about were unintentional. It was just a really similar conversations. Some were… we knew that there was going to be these intersections, but other were these wonderful sort of happenstances. Well, I did have a lot of questions around food, but you've been bringing it up in the conversation, so I'm going to leave it at that.

(00:58:56):

This is a bit of a tough question sometimes, but I am very interested in it, and I know that your thoughtful presentations, your installations are so considered. The architecture of the Wex, for those that have been in the galleries, know that there is spatial relations and different lighting and all different types of affects that one has to really consider. I'm curious how you approach the spaces, how you think about the viewer and the choreography of your work within them. So I don't know if anybody wants to start, but the viewer is very privileged, and you can feel that in each of your installations. Jumana.

Harold Mendez (00:59:43):

It's a very challenging space to work in, but everyone's show looks really great, really fantastic, and I think very nuanced. I think for those that will pay attention to details of the nuance, I think that's where it will offer a lot, I think. But I think every exhibition is really different, and I think really just trying to get the right rhythm and the kind of spacing of the work to really do its job and then within the space and to find the relationships with work, I think is quite challenging in the beginning but I think just being in the space and really paying attention to the way that the space kind of operates, I think was necessary specifically for the work to do its job.

Jumana Manna (01:00:35):

So yeah, I think thanks to the conversation with Danny, who's the curator of the show, I feel that the works are really well considered within the space. And Danny saw the show in New York and I think already came with a lot of reflections when he invited us to bring the show here to the Wex and had some ideas on how this could work with the architecture of the space. There's lots of grids in my show, which you're going to see, and there's lots of grids in this building, lots of intersecting grids. Was that okay?

(01:01:10):

So, I think that's really… the gridding and the breaking of grids is something that gets very much emphasized by showing these works in this exhibition space. So yeah, we really embraced these pillars that are very present, if you like it or not, and the differences in the ground. And yeah, I think when Danny and Dave first sent me the floor plans, I told them I don't know what I'm looking at. I didn't understand the space. I couldn't actually visualize it, even with the photographs. But yeah, I'm actually really happy with how the show is sitting right now. So I think the smaller room, which we keep referring to as the Reading Room has the more storage kind of cavernous feeling to it. And it's the works that are in there are also relating to storage and things that are hidden or out of sight. And then the main space is more kind of what's on view. Yeah. I don't know. You're going to see it tomorrow. I think it's superfluous to say more, but yeah.

Sahar Khoury (01:02:25):

Yeah, I would just say that the Wex is kind of interesting in that it's got that ramp, and I think that's what I was drawn to about it. I sort of love museums that although there are areas that you could miss, but that you're sort of like, and not so much that I love it, that you're moving necessarily to a higher point, but that you're kind of moving through every space and see it, yeah, I guess at a different level without stairs, it's kind of continuous in some way. And then, narrowness of the building. But we both talked about the grid. I definitely emphasize the grid, and you'll see it similar to Jumana tomorrow, almost trying to highlight the white exterior that's outside and then the plinths to talk about how you contend with the floor always in many spaces as a sculptor. And if you don't use pedestals, what do you do? So this was kind of a very exciting moment to actually, you'll see sort of these dimensional tiles in tomorrow's show that I think is working really well on this space, too, that create kind of this plinth that separates the work from floor, but I also think integrates with the floor as well. So yeah, the Wex is kind of a place you feel really in it. It feels really good, but it's a very difficult thing to, kind of, photograph for some reason. And we can't quite figure out why or get one vantage point that feels amazing, which is kind of refreshing in a weird way, but… So, you'll be getting the best view of this show, people who live here for sure, the live experience.

Kelly Kivland (01:04:27):

Well, we're just about at time to open it up to conversation and questions from the audience. I just want to thank you all again. And speaking of grids, I know that Ashley and Erik, are you... There you are. There you are. So just outside, as you were approaching the Wex, you most likely saw this beautiful drawing field titled *Drawing Field No. 7* by Outpost Office, Ashley Bigham and Erik Herrmann, who are in the audience. And they've also been invited and a part of this greater fall or autumn exhibition season.

(01:05:06):

Their work will also continue through modular structures that will be installed in the space, both interior and exterior mid-fall. But their work is outside, and if you can't see it when you leave here tonight, please walk by tomorrow. It's on the green or the grove we call it, right outside of the Wex. It's an incredible installation in terms of thinking about… and we're countering the grid that you see outside. So I think we're going to open up to questions, Emily. I do forget the hotline number, but I know you know it by heart, so you can do the honor of repeating it.

Emily (01:05:41):

Yes. It's up on a slide, too. It's (614) 813-3416.

Kelly Kivland (01:05:44):

There we go. Okay.

Emily (01:05:48):

But also if you raise your hand, I'll come around with a mic.

Kelly Kivland (01:05:57):

You're welcome to, yeah, raise your hand. Oh, great. Fantastic.

Audience 1 (01:06:05):

Hi. Sorry. Pardon. Hello. Hi. It's great to hear about all of these projects. I can't wait to see them tomorrow. I did have a question about context. You talked about the architecture of the space and how you were sort of responding and thinking through the very sort of unique particulars of this space. But I wondered about thinking about the audience as well and being on a college campus and how that maybe impacted how you were thinking about the work, how the work would be received and so forth.

Sahar Khoury (01:06:52):

I'm really thinking. And now I'm really thinking. It's funny. I've been here for two and a half weeks and I keep Lyfting from Lucy, the curator's house, back to my Airbnb. And I keep getting different drivers that I, sort of, they asked me about my name, and then we sort of talked about my background and I've met, and I hope they all show up, everyone that I've talked to because they're from... They're just amazing. But none of them knew of Wexner Center for the Arts. They knew the Wexner Medical Center. I let them know, and it has made me kind of think about this thing that we do in these spaces and how small the audience sometimes is. And so, I do hope... I teach at UC Berkeley—an advanced ceramics class there—just as an adjunct. And to even convince my students there to go to BAMPFA is a very difficult task.

(01:08:08):

So, I don't know. I'm kind of actually wondering… I know we're doing our job, and I love museums. I love seeing work in a context that's outside of a home or that's very isolated so that you can kind of experience it. But I am grappling with its function in a way sometimes, too, and the work and the effort and yeah, I don't know how many Ohio State students go to the show, but I hope they go more to it and experience art more. I think we actually need to help people appreciate the importance of art, not as a how-to-wind-down thing, but actually as a very critical, incredibly critical practice. So...

PART 3 OF 4 ENDS [01:09:04]

Kelly Kivland (01:09:19):

Harold, did you have... I mean, even beyond art and thinking about all the departments, all the thinkers, students, the conversations that are happening across campus and especially as it reflects in the work, on view, that's a really great question.

Harold Mendez (01:09:43):

Yeah. I mean, I think a university should reflect the world in which we're living in. I mean, it's incredibly diverse from ethnic, kind of, makeup to sexual orientation, to the kinds of ideas we want to engage with. And I think museums, at least the way I consider museums as a place to be engaged with history and also the future, and really thinking about learning something, whether it's materially or something that might be political that I wasn't aware of.

(01:10:15):

And I think, yeah, I mean, I think museums can often be off-putting for a lot. I think, like you said, Sahar, that I had several drivers that were, "Are you a professor here?" I'm like, "Well, not really," but I'm hoping they're going to be showing up with their families on... And I mentioned that it's also free. And I think... I didn't grow up going to museums. My parents were working

class immigrants and art was not a thing that I was exposed to, but I've sort of found my way into it and just followed my curiosity.

(01:10:50):

And I think a university should also help reflect being curious and really thinking about what you can learn from the kind of engagement. And the three of us have a lot to offer, I think, not just in terms of what the work does materially, but what the work is pointing to, right? And the kind of histories and political narratives that we're interested in and engaging with and how important that is for artists like ourselves.

(01:11:14):

And that those things are reflected not just on a university campus, but globally. So I think maybe to answer your question in terms of the context, I think maybe what is also important to consider is finding the right kind of work and the right kind of narrative arc to present that to a broader audience so that they might be able to grab onto something, whether it's more material or maybe it's more kind of a narrative thing.

Jumana Manna (01:11:48):

I think that's a good question and maybe not one that's normally posed to artists, hence the long silence after you asked this. Because yeah, frankly, it's not something I thought about. Also, because the show was not commissioned for the Wexner Center, but was brought here. But I can say that I'm happy that it's here and that it's on a college campus and that I know that there's already classes that are going to be coming to see the films in particular.

(01:12:15):

There's also going to be screenings of the film in the cinema here. So six screenings of Foragers in the cinema and two of Wild Relatives, which I'm really happy about, which means a more kind of focused start to end viewings of the film, so. And my films often are shown in educational settings and in university and teaching, various teaching situations. So in a way, it's nice to just have that immediate proximity with the university.

(01:12:40):

And for me, making the work is like being a student. I mean, I'm kind of studying things and learning so much each time I work on something else. And I hope that also that the experience of viewing the work and engaging with it can translate some of that kind of curiosity and learning experience. But yeah, I mean, I think it's thanks also to the work that the institution does, then that outreach happens to the rest of the campus and hopefully also beyond in the city.

Audience 2 (01:13:20):

Hi. OSU student here. So, there will be students at the show, I promise. I actually study anthropology here, so a lot of my interests tend to be culturally based. And I hear a lot of different cultures throughout the exhibit and the works along with other ties, like to food and the politicization of food, and everything that goes into that, which I just keep being drawn back to how the location is so important in the development of cultures, how there's foraged food within the area, the materials that are found, and how there's also foraged and found materials within your work.

(01:14:03):

And so, I was wondering if there was anything specific to your own personal locations where you've been living throughout these works, how the places you've lived have interacted with this, kind of in an own personal culture aspect along with historical culture, family culture, different things within that. Just kind of if there was anything that you personally felt important to add to it. Yeah, thank you.

Jumana Manna (01:14:37):

I can continue.

Sahar Khoury (01:14:38):

Yeah, go for it.

Jumana Manna (01:14:39):

I think that was one of Kelly's questions, so thank you for bringing it up, of the unasked questions. Yeah. I guess, we all share an interest in anthropology and maybe also many artists do. It's a kind of visual anthropology that we do. Also in the research that I consider, that there is a lot of kind of, I called it curiosity, but interviewing that happens, be that with people or objects or kind of materials or spending time with things, right? Which is what also anthropologists do with this kind of slightly outside view in order to interrogate it again and look at it anew.

(01:15:19):

So yeah, that anthropological interest is definitely present. And all my work has to do with the places that I have lived in and come from. So I'm Palestinian, from Jerusalem. Palestine continues to be the center of my thought, I would say, and drive for a lot of my practice. I studied in Norway, so I've done a number of works that relate to Norway, hence also my decision to work on Wild Relatives, which reflects vaguely my movements between the Middle East and Norway or the North of Europe.

(01:15:59):

So, kind of, the journeys of the seeds are familiar because it's a journey that I've been doing quite a lot. And Foragers has my own family in it. So, my parents are the main characters of the film. So, it's immediately connected to my family. It's a mix of family members and actors in the film, which, I think, if I wouldn't have said this, you maybe would not have known that. And that's good. I mean, it wasn't intended as a family portrait, but that was important for me in the making of the work. So, definitely, I mean, all of the, kind of, characters and lives and objects that are there come through my own personal trajectory and history.

Sahar Khoury (01:16:47):

Yeah. I guess I would just say in anthropology, you know how you have that insider outsider always talking about that kind of space that you ride. And so like Jumana and Harold, there's obviously very personal archive things, artifacts from my own personal life that are in the show. But at the same time, I don't speak Arabic. My father learned Farsi when he married my mom, so we only spoke Persian in the house. So that language is completely lost to me.

(01:17:26):

So, in a way, this show, I kind of feel that my connection to that part is as an outsider in a strange way because language is so important. Although sonically, I can hear it, I can hear when I hear an Arabic person that might be from Jordan or might be from Lebanon. There's just

a certain dialect. But anyway, I think it's just, kind of, this… that's where I feel like anthropology is coming in in my work where I'm doing a level of translation that is very slippery and that, I'm sure, I don't know how people would feel, especially at the kebab wind chime.

(01:18:11):

It's very violent looking. It looks like intestines at times. It almost looks anti-meat. And if you're someone who eats that every day, I sort of like riding that line. I eat kebabs. I'm not vegan, although I support that. But it's sort of this... So I'm not sort of putting these things out as they are something that they're close to me and they're also distant. I don't know how to describe it. And that's I think why I did this show is truly trying to mine my way through something that I have very few things left to interrogate.

Harold Mendez (01:18:58):

I think, just in my case, I think the specificity of place is always an important aspect in the work. And I'm someone who's really pulling from the Americas. And what I mean by that is Latin America specifically, I'm the whole kind of hemispheric region, right? Thinking about the history, pre-conquest, sort of pre-Columbian histories and then also at point of conquest and up until contemporary notions of that.

(01:19:27):

And really thinking about these differences between, or moving between… from South America through Mexico and Central America into the US and really thinking about the relationships between the Americas, both politically, economically, the kinds of violence that has been placed on both sides of those continents in that instance. And really kind of driving work from being from both places, right? And kind of questioning this idea of belonging, right?

(01:19:59):

Well, I'm from both of those places, so for me it's not about home is one place or my references are from one place, but it's really kind of spread out and really trying to explore that through the work. And but, I think, in my case, for instance, the exhibition, it's not just about those personal relationships, but it's also the works.

(01:20:21):

The titles specifically have their own kind of index and thinking about poetics and thinking about pointing to writers like Édouard Glissant, and thinking about the French Caribbean, and thinking about the relationship there, or they're thinking about Incan manuscripts, and then thinking about these other relationships with history.

(01:20:46):

So, it's a kind of global network. And I think that's one thing that is maybe, on the one hand, is we're pulling from really specific places, but we're also thinking globally how that... We also move throughout the world and thinking about our work and researching that and really trying to draw those things into the practice to, kind of, really expand that and make it meaningful, but also, I think, complex and nuanced in those ways.

Emily Haidet (01:21:19):

Hotline question?

Jess Xiao Long (01:21:22):

Yep. This got sent in on the Hotline, I think to all of the artists, “Is representation a burden, and do you ever feel that limits your work?”

Harold Mendez (01:21:37):

I think representation is a burden when it deals with image making, specifically photography. I think photography, I mean, in my case, there’s photographic work. We think of the… so the camera, right? As a tool that followed the Bible and the gun. Right? And they’re all kind of colonial or they have their sort of historical challenges. And I think photography has long had a... yeah, issues with, because it’s sort of looking at the way that Europe, or the way that we consider image making through a kind of European perspective.

(01:22:24):

I think now there’s more interest in not positioning work in that way, that it’s reliant in Europe and that perspective, but looking in these other ways of making and thinking. So, in some cases, I think that image making can be challenging, I think. But I think everything is fair game and I think we should be able to just, kind of, really make whatever we want. The studio is the place where it’s a full-on laboratory to experiment and really bring these ideas forward that I think can push things.

Jumana Manna (01:23:05):

I like that you responded to that through images in particular because I think that my attraction to making sculpture was related to escaping images, because they are always over determined by the place and people who are in those images, place, at least even if there’s no people. While sculpture is seemingly more liberated or at least a couple of steps away from that. So there is kind of more room for abstraction or for dislocation from a particular geography and representation into, yeah, perhaps something that’s more universal, although I don’t really like that term. And maybe back to the representation burden thing, I think every burden is also a gift of some kind, or a drive, a motor from which one works.

(01:24:01):

And so, yes, it is a burden, but then it also is a sense of direction or it’s a… defines positionality of some kind, which is I think the only true way from which one works and thinks and moves in the world. So it can never be only a burden, and the burden is usually coming by the gaze of others, let’s say. That one tends to have to deal with if you want to or not. And even if you’re not dealing with it when you’re making the work, you realize that that representation is kind of, how do you say? Dropped upon you in ways that you don’t always control. Hm?

Sahar Khoury (01:24:51):

Don’t Apologize.

Jumana Manna (01:24:51):

Don’t apologize, yeah.

Sahar Khoury (01:24:53):

Yeah. No, no. That is a mic drop. What you just said the best way to describe it.

Emily Haidet (01:25:02):

So I think we have time for one more question.

Audience 3 (01:25:07):

Hi. So, I think it's very easy to draw parallels to what you are doing to a chef, not just in the context of food itself, art about food, but in the context of taking raw materials or footage and transforming it into something else. You're concerned with presentation and encouraging people to think about where things come from.

(01:25:32):

You have a direct line into people's heads, just like chefs have a direct line in their stomachs, but you're less concerned... You don't have to worry about physical sustenance. And how do you think that this lack of boundary—you don't have to feed someone the literal food to nourish their mind—that… how do you feel that opens up what you're doing and gives you an advantage in talking about food rather than someone who's physically preparing food?

Sahar Khoury (01:26:24):

Well, we have the advantage that we don't have... I think it's very hard to make... Chefs actually have a harder job, in a way, because there has to be the aesthetics and then it also has to taste good. I mean, we have to deal with timing, too, but... And presentation. I don't know. I mean, that's a very good question, and I'm sorry I don't have a good answer for you, but I can say that, I think... It's fun. Actually, I'll answer this, that chefs, I think, also they'll borrow from the, especially now with Instagram, they'll borrow from the sculpture vocabulary, right? I'm seeing the most incredible things made out of food that are clearly, completely about creating a sculpture, the chocolate stuff. You know what I'm talking about. So it's kind of interesting that I think all of our work is actually trying to go to, kind of, the fundamentals mostly, right? Of the food that we're presenting.

(01:27:35):

It's weird. There's not much that we're trying to change. I don't think we're trying to make it look so real that you're fooled, but more that you're looking at the food and kind of thinking about it as this object that you encounter. And it's, I don't know, I'm sorry, you guys. I'm fading. The transformation of food. It's like if a kebab can become a wind chime, how magical is that? Or that the pita, after I've made it looks like a loofah to me. It's just this beautiful bridge that all of these things that we're dealing with are completely interconnected. And that's all I'll say.

Harold Mendez (01:28:25):

I'm going to attempt this. That was a tough one. But I mean, I think we all have this relationship of gathering at a table. Right? And thinking about, I love it when you're having a meal and you're talking about the next meal.

(01:28:38):

And the, kind of, ideas that happen over a meal and the, kind of, scheming and plotting and creating and really imagining those things often happen at the kitchen table or your, like in my case, my mom. Right? And I think a book or poetry, literature, music, these are these things that they offer and food. Right?

(01:29:04):

They offer us a kind of sustenance, whether it's to sustain us in a kind of daily basis, but also emotionally thinking about how we can expand ourselves in all kinds of ways that have meaning. And food is one of those ways, and art is another one of those ways. And having a conversation is another.

Kelly Kivland (01:29:27):

Well done. Thank you all. Dionne.

Dionne Custer Edwards (01:29:40):

This is, whoa. This is the formal part. Thank you, Kelly, Jumana, Sahar, Harold. Thank you so much. Thank you, all of you, for coming out tonight and for being curious. I love that we, sort of, talked about this being a site for curiosity, a site for critical thought. I love that we ended it on food as shows up in the work, but that we were thinking about art as sustenance, as... Maybe the speaker... as art as a sustenance, food as sustenance, rethinking sustenance.

(01:30:17):

I had like to remind you all that tomorrow evening is the exhibition opening, and you'll be able to see all three of these artists and their work on view in the galleries beginning at 6:30. Again, there'll be small bites, a cash bar, a DJ, DJ Trueskills will be here, plus food trucks. Zaki Grill and Graeter's Ice Cream on the plaza outside. So we hope that you will join us tomorrow for a party. So, thank you all for coming out. Have a good night.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:31:06]