

**Rachel Bride Ashton**

**Walking Without Walls**

**Digital Collaboration with May Murad, Gaza**

**Artists Report 2018**

This project was a year-long digital communication between me, a painter in Scotland and May Murad, a painter in Gaza. During this time we exchanged images of and painted each other's landscapes, mapped out and organised a walking marathon in each country and collected and catalogued plants along the way. It began as a series of roughly interconnected ideas and grew into a multi-layered, inter-disciplinarily collaboration and friendship with long lasting consequences and connections.



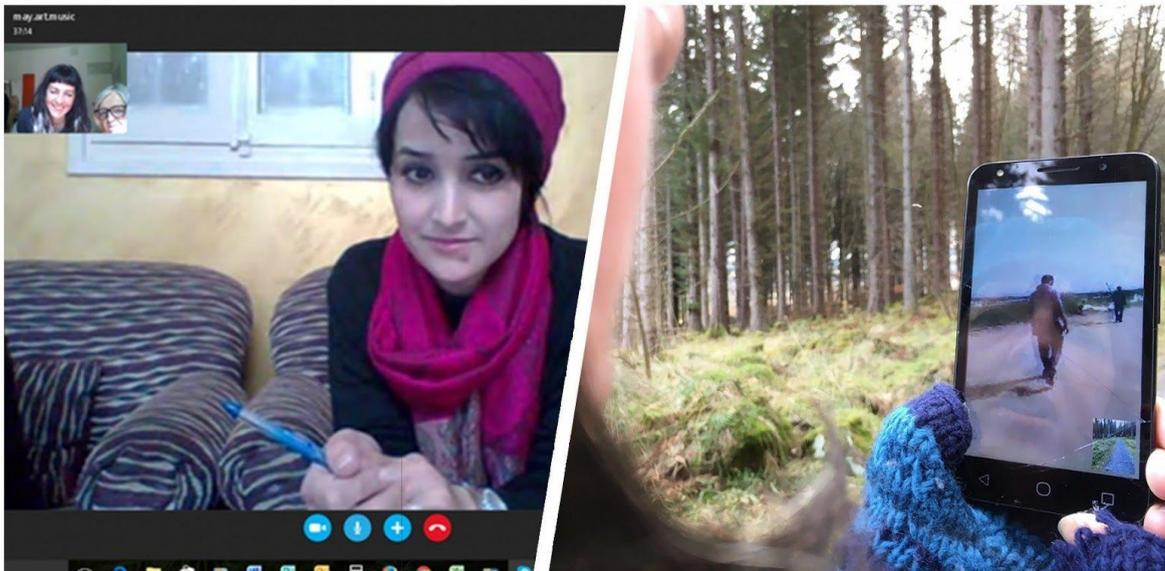
Walking out the marathon route was an integral part of the project in Gaza and Scotland and through this, plants and their history were discovered, researched and catalogued, landscapes were digitally recorded and exchanged, politics, art, agriculture and many other subjects discussed and many friendships were forged. The route for me was also a walk into my past as the route inadvertently passed nearby several of my childhood haunts, homes and friends.

Wild plant properties was already an interest of mine, but within this project, using Rosa Luxemburg's jotters as a point of inspiration, I had the opportunity to research plants more thoroughly, extensively and creatively and also engage public interest in them. I ran plant journaling and plant drawing workshops with adults and in the local schools and the Sheltered Housing and was dismayed to find how little knowledge of local wild plants remains, but also cheered that there is interest in re-discovering the edibility and medicinal value of them and I plan to continue this element of the project, through more workshops/walks and knowledge sharing on the Facebook page *Citizen Herbarium* that we set up for this purpose.

As Rosa Luxemburg was a pacifist and an activist and because of 2018 being the centenary of the end of WW1 and because of the political nature of the collaboration with May, the project could have branched off in so many additional directions and there was a point I had to take stock and decide how much I could realistically achieve in a year.

In my communication with May, we shared and learned much about each other's families, cultures, landscape and politics and I did my own research into the history of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. It was a very personal insight into the life of someone living under an occupation and my understanding of the situation has increased massively. There was however, a strange reversal of visual expectations, initially, because we embarked on the project just four months after my home had been destroyed by a massive house fire and the pictures I showed May looked superficially more like the aftermath of a warzone than the pictures May showed me. She was also surprised by the unconventional off-grid way I live too (before and after the fire) and we discovered many things we had in common, including our shared use of the same kind of petrol generator and batteries to provide back-up electricity. Even with these similarities, though, talking with May has highlighted comparatively how much choice and freedom we have in Scotland and is a reminder to be very grateful for this.

Painting the Gaza landscape threw up, for me, some surprising reactions and problems and has



ultimately changed and advanced my practice radically, possibly permanently. I was to paint May's landscape and I had a chance to shine a light on the oppression May and the people of Gaza live under, but my reaction initially was to hide in what was familiar; the green foliage in her Grandparents' back garden; especially since this seemed to be what May mainly wanted to show me. I asked her, with trepidation if she could also show me any signs of the occupation like border walls and she showed me a leaflet dropped by an Israeli warplane, warning the people of Gaza to stay away from the border fences or they would be shot at. But she was able to show me the entrance to one of the overcrowded refugee camps, which I subsequently painted many times while investigating my feelings of discomfort around requesting to see evidence of another people's oppression and trying to paint it. I expressed some of this in a poem, which was painted onto one of the refugee camp paintings in English and Arabic, translated for me by May. For an event linked to my project; an evening of peace related songs and poetry, which I hosted, I also wrote a song that reflected on peace and conflict, walking and displaced people.

The Pathmakers Gathering which hosted speakers on political walking and political activism, worked well with a preview of my paintings the day before the marathon instead of after, as is usually

