

LIVES FROM THE RUINS

Curators Tamar Beja, Asma Kazmi, and Gazelle Samizay
on moving images from Palestine



Larissa Sansour, *Nation Estate* (2012), film, 9'. Courtesy the artist.

Stitching Keffiyehs: Moving Images from Palestine, an urgent and captivating exhibition at UC Berkeley, was conceived in response to Israel's ongoing siege of Gaza—a brutal campaign which, as of this writing, has killed an estimated 46,000 Palestinians, including some 15,000 children, and displaced nearly two million others.

Moving image artists, both in Palestine and among the diaspora, have documented the Israeli occupation for decades, creating a substantial body of work that curators and scholars are only now beginning to study in its depth and formal complexity. The organizers of *Stitching Keffiyehs*—Tamar Beja, Asma Kazmi, and Gazelle Samizay—have assembled a dozen experimental works by contemporary filmmakers, which examine the daily lives of Palestinian women alongside more thematic questions: fractured memory, imaginary futures, the right to return.

The exhibit, featuring works by Razan AlSalah, Zeina Barakeh, Mona Rouhana Benyamin, Samia Halaby, Mona Hatoum, Jumana Manna, Larissa Sansour, and Oraib Toukan, ran for two weeks in February and March 2024 at Berkeley's Worth Ryder Art Gallery. *MFJ* invited the curators to discuss the exhibition, and they have collectively responded to our questions in writing.

NICHOLAS GAMSO, FOR *MFJ*

MFJ: When I visited *Stitching Keffiyehs* I was struck by its attention to memory and testimony, to everyday life riven with the experience of displacement and loss, to otherworldliness and speculative visions (Mona Rouhana Benyamin's work), and of course to the matter of land. Could you speak about some of the key themes you see at work in the pieces you featured—and perhaps whether these are currents in Palestinian moving image practice more generally?

Tamar Beja, Asma Kazmi, and Gazelle Samizay: The films we chose for *Stitching Keffiyehs* are poetic evocations of dispossession, discrimination, and exile made from 1987 to 2022. The uncompromising artworks are undeniably political, but also subversive, intimate, and even humorous. While some works utilize fiction to narrate the Palestinian experience, others use artifacts, archives, and testimonies from people in Palestine, Israel, and in the diaspora. These artworks serve as critically important historical documents in the face of the deliberate and

systematic cultural erasure of Palestine since the Nakba in 1948. This erasure includes the killing of intellectuals and storytellers, and the destruction and looting of art, books, manuscripts, records, and official archives.

As the curators, we wanted to bring together works that showed the legacy of colonialism in Palestine, and its continued hold on the present moment. The curated testimonies in *Stitching Keffiyehs* take the form of speech, singing, poetry, translation, fabulation, and other voiced acts, all seeking to honor the collective survival and resistance of the Palestinian people. The films in literary critic Saidiya Hartman's words resurrect "lives from the ruins" by visualizing suppressed day-to-day struggles of people living under the Israeli occupation, and the displacement and exile of Palestinians in the diaspora.

While these works were made before the 2023 invasion of Gaza by Israel, they offer historical context for the present moment. They channel an assortment of narratives that comes from within Palestinian communities, counteracting the erasures perpetuated by Israeli and US media. For instance, in Mona Hatoum's autobiographical film *Measures of Distance* (1988), the artist and her mother speak intimately about the pain of their family's displacement from Haifa in the 1948 Nakba. Subsequently, in the 1980s, the artist was left stranded in London, unable to return to her family in Lebanon when the Lebanese Civil War broke out. In the film, Hatoum shows her double exile as a palimpsest of photographs, Arabic text, and voiceover narration that embodies the emotional longing between a mother and a daughter. The familial testimonies depict the unbearable pain of the Nakba and beyond—a perspective that is rarely allowed to be seen and is repeatedly denied by the Israeli state.

Mona Benyamin's *Moonscape* (2020), like Hatoum's work, also features the artist's parents. The familial appearances and exchanges in both films produce an intimacy between the viewer, the artists, and the artists' close relatives by bringing their personal stories to the forefront. Both Hatoum and Benyamin boldly share their worlds by telling their families' stories of displacement and exile, allowing the viewer to connect to these stories on a deeply emotional level.

Benyamin's *Moonscape* differs in tone and approach from Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*. *Moonscape* is a humorous music video that features the artist's elaborately-dressed parents performing a duet in Arabic about purchasing land on the moon

through the Lunar Embassy. Using visual tropes from film noir, the diverse geographies visualized in the piece include a surrealist lunar landscape with a dancing alien, NASA found footage, and a digital interface of a series of email correspondences between the artist and staff members of the Lunar Embassy.

In the lighthearted but connotative email exchange, the artist philosophizes about property ownership on the Moon in the face of the denial of the right to return for Palestinian refugees living around the world. For instance, in one email Benjamin writes, “I wanted to ask a question regarding the Galactic passport and nationality you offer on your website. Can the passport be used for traveling on Earth? Seeing as I am a Palestinian who carries an Israeli passport, it is illegal for me to enter a few of our neighboring countries such as Lebanon, since Israel and Lebanon are at a state of war.” In this way the artist satirizes and historicizes a painful reality and creates a space where the viewer can explore, in the artist’s words, “the relationship between hope, nostalgia, and despair.”

MFJ: I’m curious to hear what conversations you had as a curatorial group—and how the artists you are working with enrich and problematize these demarcations. Along these lines: your show covers a long period of Palestinian history—going back as far as the 1980s. How have these themes changed/developed in that time?

TB, AK, GS: This exhibition emerged from our discussions about the recent news and images of devastation, death, and genocide that have profoundly impacted the Palestinian people, and which we and our students had been witnessing since October 7, 2023. Gazelle Samizay, who works with a large number of student interns as the director of the Worth Ryder Art Gallery, recognized the students’ interest in the Palestinian cause, since they were attending walkouts and participating in boycotts to end the brutal occupation of Gaza. The involvement of the students, faculty, and staff was our impetus to organize the show, which required conversations within our own department, and with other departments and centers on campus.

Utilizing our teaching gallery space, we wanted to leverage the power of art to locate overlaps between theory, history, and praxis. Our curatorial vision involved bringing together works where nuanced objects, gestures, and visual forms communicated the complex realities of the Palestinian experience to the public. We wanted to create a space for reflection, dialogue, and solidarity—one which would remind our community of the transformative power of art in times of adversity.

MFJ: Are you conscious of presenting a feminist Palestinian film discourse, with attention to familial relations (Mona Hatoum’s *Measures of Distance*), domestic and life-sustaining practices (Jumana Manna’s *Foragers*)?

TB, AK, GS: It was not our intention to create an exhibition exclusively featuring female-identifying artists. But as we researched artists, with generous input from Yasmin Tawil at the Arab Film and Media Institute in San Francisco, we realized that our favorite works had a feminist perspective. These pieces depicted human dignity and showed glimpses of everyday experience of Palestinians and their inextricable relations to their own history, land, and resources. For example, in *Foragers* (2022), artist Jumana Manna takes an ecofeminist approach in describing Palestinian landscapes and innovation by highlighting the deep-rooted indigenous ties to wild Za’atar, a staple of Palestinian cooking. Paradoxically, she also shows the Israeli colonial apparatus of surveillance, seizure, and arrest which is set up to disenfranchise Palestinians and break their cultural ties to their land. The various perspectives are framed through the deeply felt connections of multigenerational feminine protagonists. In this way, Jumana Manna speaks of entangled relations between a place and people and how the loss of land and food sources alter both individual and collective bodies.

Nation Estate (2012), a sci-fi short film by Larissa Sansour calls attention to the way historical narratives mingle or coalesce with dystopian visions, and does so with humor. Sansour utilizes sleek animation and digital image generation to give a new visual form to the rapidly shrinking territory of Palestine, imagining a sovereign Palestinian nation housed in a supertall office tower—what she calls, ironically, a “vertical solution to Palestinian statehood.” *Nation Estate* is a sardonic vision of Palestine which functions as a nostalgic memory, a ghostly afterimage of historic *Falastine*, while at the same time depicted as a polished capitalist Eden. Sansour uses science fiction to show new futurist trajectories for an occupied land, but in a technological world without justice, land, home, places of worship, food, and comfort are still haunted by colonial bondage.

The feminist perspectives in *Stitching Keffiyehs* historicize the *longue durée* of the current siege of Gaza. As curators, we picked works that are in conversation with each other and are politically and poetically entangled. In our publicity materials we deliberately chose not to highlight the fact that the films had female authors because we wanted to avoid gender-based demarcations. We wanted to normalize the fact that a comprehensive chronicling about a location can take place within the parameters of a feminist visual practice.



Mona Benyamin, *Moonscape* (2020). Film still. Courtesy the artist.



Jumana Manna, *Foragers* (2022), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



TOP Zeina Barakeh, *The Third Half* (2008), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.



BOTTOM Zeina Barakeh, *Slam Bang Blue* (2018), frame enlargement. Courtesy the artist.

MFJ: I wonder if you could reflect on growing interest in Palestinian moving image practices in light of the current siege of Gaza. Does the widespread attention to Palestinian work in art spaces come as a surprise? Or is there a degree of frustration—*why only now?*

TB, AK, GS: The richness and the diversity of the films in *Stitching Keffiyehs* are a testament to Palestinian artists' contribution to contemporary art and cinema. We acknowledge that there is currently more interest in Palestinian art within certain circles due to the increased awareness of the apartheid and genocide. However, this occurs against the backdrop of historical neglect and deliberate exclusion of Palestinian artists from American art and academic institutions. We want to emphasize that the art ownership and leadership class at major museums—the collectors, trustees, directors, and board members—are often not politically aligned with the artists they represent, especially when it comes to the Palestinian cause. As is typical of systemic cultural exclusion, much of this censorship is invisible to all but the Palestinian artists themselves, and to those who have been wanting to hear Palestinian perspectives in US galleries and museums.

It is only this year that cancellations of exhibitions by Palestinian artists and others addressing the war have become more high profile. Notable events include the December 2023 cancellation of Samia Halaby's retrospective exhibition at Indiana University's Eskenazi Museum of Art; *Artforum's* firing of its editor-in-chief David Velasco for publishing "An Open Letter From the Art Community to Cultural Organizations," which over 800 artists and art workers signed; and El Museo del Barrio, New York's October 2023 exclusion of *Recorder y Unificar* by Roy Baizan and Odalys Burgoa, which included a Palestinian flag. Here in the Bay Area, we saw the dramatic closing of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts to censor its own exhibiting artists (which included alumni and faculty from UC Berkeley's art department) in February 2024. The ensuing public support for the artists and their right to protest was immense, resulting in the resignation of YBCA CEO Sara Fenske Bahat, who unjustifiably accused the artists of being antisemitic for speaking against the Israeli siege and genocide in Gaza.

We want to emphasize the utility of erasing Palestine and Palestinian expression for the national Zionist project—and the complicity of art institutions, in Israel and the US, in this project. Israel was founded on the myth that the Palestinian people had no established connection to the land that they lived on, so cultural documents that show complex and nuanced representations of Palestinian rootedness have been systematically destroyed, as even the International Criminal Court has recently acknowledged. Israel's creative erasure is essential for inventing settler myths

(e.g., "making the desert bloom") as well as controlling its own population's perceptions, whether by denying academic positions to Palestinian or pro-Palestinian scholars and artists, or by raiding Palestinian art spaces, such as Dar Yusuf Nasri Jacir for Art and Research in Bethlehem (founded by filmmaker Annmarie Jacir and artist Emily Jacir), which was ransacked by IDF soldiers in 2021.

For Tamar Beja, an Israeli American, another motivation for curating this show was to tell stories that she did not hear growing up in Israeli American spaces. Palestinians were depicted as an abstraction, a problem to be solved rather than as human beings. Tamar recognizes that this distance was reinforced and weaponized continually, and for her it is doubly important to tell Palestinian stories so that we may willfully stop perpetuating ignorance and dehumanization.

While the daily humiliation, devastation, death, and torture of Palestinian people is unbearable to witness, and the situation in Gaza becomes more dire every day, we are heartened by the solidarity movements that have exploded all around the world and we see our work of curating *Stitching Keffiyehs* as directly tied to efforts to elevate Palestinian artists. The writer and activist Mohammed el-Kurd points to the fact that Israeli oppression tactics are familiar to anyone who knows the history of colonization and apartheid, and that there are direct links between Palestine and other indigenous struggles elsewhere. *Stitching Keffiyehs* is a small node in the web of resistance activities, especially the powerful student encampments on campuses around the world. We are taking our lead from Palestinian artists and their counter-hegemonic work that makes visible injustices and subjugation, all while placing people, plants, indigenous knowledge systems, notions of belonging—not just a nation—at the center of our concerns.

MFJ: What are some of the ways the Palestinian question has affected regional identity and art practices? I'm thinking of how many of your contributors are from neighboring countries with large refugee populations, and not just from Palestine. What obstacles have the contributing artists faced of late?

TB, AK, GS: The exiled and fragmented status of Palestinian artists, including the artists in *Stitching Keffiyehs*, allows for what Edward Said calls an *originality of vision*. The complexity of the experience of estrangement and emotive histories of colonized bodies propels the work in the exhibit. While marked by pain, relating the stories of people in the diaspora enables cross-cultural and transnational understanding, and it is through this framework that each artist self-defines. Cut off from their roots, the artists move between various representational strategies

including speculative travel to Palestine in Razan AlSalah's and Larissa Sansour's work; translation of language and representing the trauma of war in Mona Hatoum's and Oraib Toukan's films; representing the local flora to speak about entangled relations between food, labor, and land in Jumana Manna's film; and exploring myths and fabulation to engender reparative narratives in Zeina Barakeh's animations. By using these diverse storytelling methods, the artists communicate a sense of dislocation and uprootedness while reminding us of human commonalities.

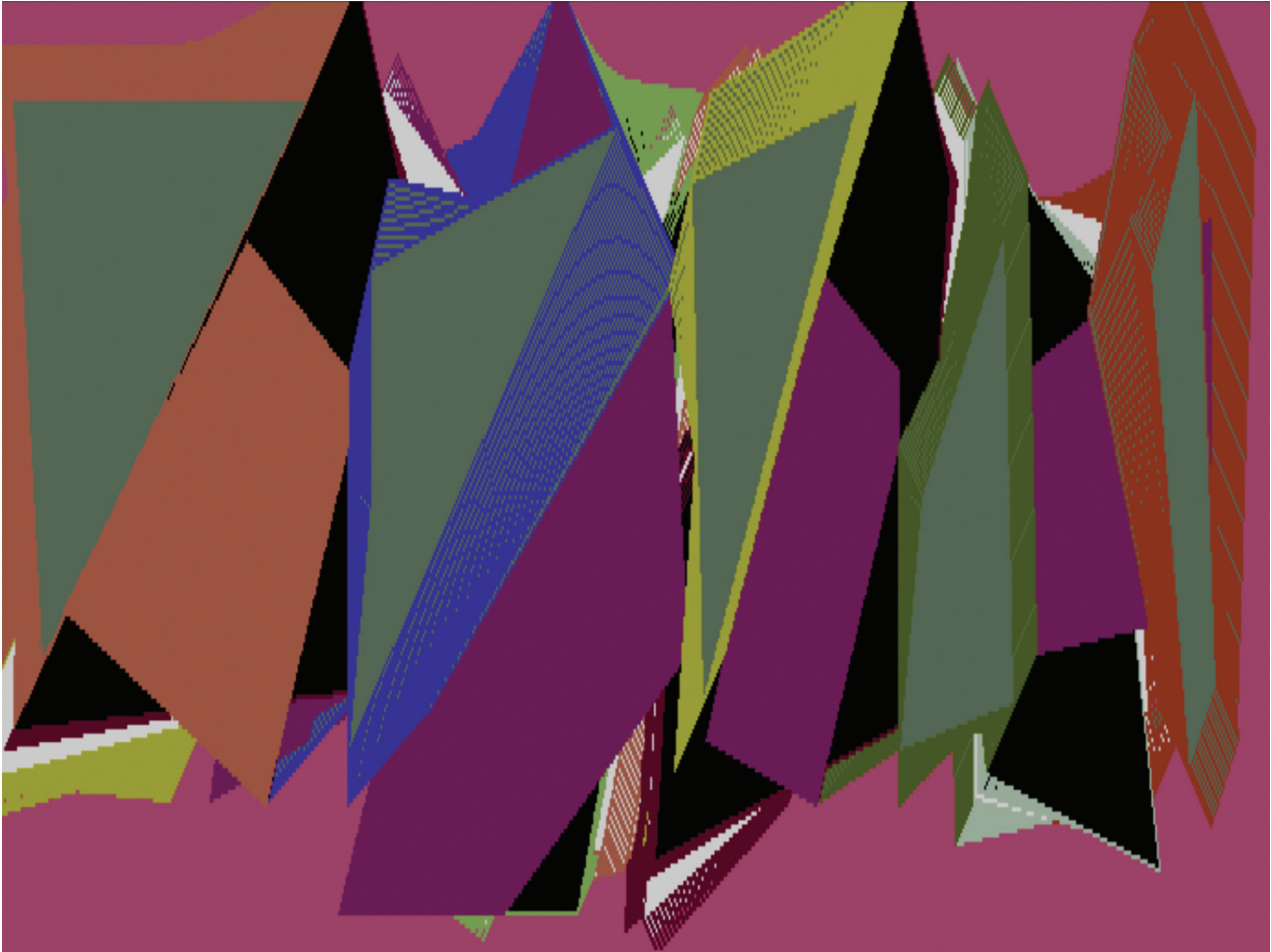
Samia Halaby's *Land* and *Niihau* (1988 & 1987) incorporates the open-ended language of abstraction to translate her experience of exile. Halaby, along with her family, was displaced from Palestine in 1948. Trained in the US, Halaby is a painter and one of the earliest new media artists, using computer code in the 1980s to develop kinetic paintings that combined color, geometric form, movement, and sound. During a time when established Western artists and critics were insistent on reading abstraction as a "pure" invention unattached to history or society, Halaby was using abstracted forms to develop a language for political critique. In direct opposition to the legacy of formalist art critic Clement Greenberg, Halaby was creating pictorial forms based on her research into massacres in Palestine and elsewhere, linking the Palestinian struggle with the struggle of other indigenous communities around the world. The two digital kinetic paintings in *Stitching Keffiyehs* were made in the late 1980s when Halaby taught at the University of Hawaii, Manoa. She dedicates the work *Niihau* to indigenous and working-class Hawaiian people as she develops imagery that shows poignant interwoven histories and peoples' collective struggles.

Stitching Keffiyehs represents a collective montage of alternate feminist visions, re-centered mythologies, and dreams of technological futures that are empowered and liberatory, and which help us understand how art can remain vital, relevant, and enduring even during a genocide. As audiences move from one screening to another, they can become enfolded into the physical and emotional landscape of the films and transfixed by the beauty and humanity of the visuals.

MFJ: And the exhibition's title?

TB, AK, GS: The title of the show was inspired from the hopeful lines in a poem by Suheir Hammad, who writes,

*I stitch the story
 Falastin
 into a keffiyeh
 never to unravel*



Samia Halaby, *Land* (1987), still from kinetic painting coded on an Amiga computer. Courtesy the artist.