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Musa Hadid and David Osit

Online this week

On Thursday we published **Marisa Mazria Katz's** [conversation with director David Osit](#) about his film *Mayor*, which follows Musa Hadid, the official who oversees Ramallah in the West Bank. The film tells the story of a mayor determined to bring beauty and dignity to the lives of his constituents, many of whom will never travel more than a few miles outside their neighborhood, surrounded on all sides by Israeli settlements.



Mazria Katz has reported on culture and politics around the world, including from Casablanca, Kabul, Port-au-Prince, and Istanbul, for *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, NPR, and other outlets. Formerly the editor of *Creative Time Reports*, she contributes regularly to our pages, and her conversations with artists reveal a sensitivity to how a work of art can carry the complexity of an individual's experience, especially by quietly illuminating that which is usually hidden from view. Mazria Katz also runs the Eyebeam Center for the Future of Journalism, a grant-making program that supports artists and artist-journalist teams.



David Osit

In her interview with David Osit, Mazria Katz remarks on how, in forgoing familiar scenes of violence and repression, the perspective of *Mayor* differs from many portraits of the occupation of Palestine: “Instead of the typical trope of visualizing Palestine with a military checkpoint or separation wall, we feel the constraints on the occupied territories in scenes like the one where we see locals observe, from a rooftop, the ever-shrinking distance between their home and the ever-expanding Israeli settlements.”

She asks Osit about a central scene in the film, in which Hadid meets with German delegates who are trying to facilitate a dialogue between the Palestinians and Israelis, an interaction that underscores the long-term Western insistence that Palestinians should “just make nice with Israelis,” Mazria Katz writes. Osit replies:

The Global South is constantly asked by the West to lift themselves up, and Palestine's no exception. And this is a mayor, frankly, who plays the part. He wears a suit. He's Christian. He's charismatic. He speaks English. He's beloved. He is everything that the West wants a mayor in Palestine to be—but we reject him, anyway. We reject his pleas, always with this notion that this will all be better if *you* just toe the line.

I asked Mazria Katz what drew her to the film, and what made her want to speak to Osit after watching it. “I have been covering the region on and off since 2003,” Mazria Katz answered by email. “I feel mainstream reportage on Palestine rarely privileges stories on culture and daily life as a means to talk about the brutality of the occupation. This is why I felt so strongly about *Mayor*, which was one of the first films I had seen that tells the story of a dynamic city like Ramallah through the everyday, and consequently upends traditional takes on the crisis.”

It's a city Mazria Katz has spent some time in. “I moved to Tel Aviv in 2003 and stayed for several years,” she told me. “While there, I would frequently write about Palestine. In fact, my first reported piece for *The New York Times* focused on the way the occupation is inextricably affecting tourism in the West Bank. Over the years I covered the work of Palestinian artists for several publications, including the first Palestine pavilion at the 2009 Venice Biennale for *The Economist's Intelligent Life* [now known as *1843* magazine]. In 2018, I worked on a radio documentary series and [one episode](#) focused on an educator who lived between Ramallah and the Al-Arroub refugee camp—and it was through our time together I got to see just how much Ramallah had transformed, even in the past few years.”

There's a sense throughout *Mayor* of how the mundane bureaucracy required of running any municipality is, for Hadid, additionally dangerous—as when Israeli soldiers are threatening to break into city hall to confiscate surveillance cameras—and at times absurd: conversations about how best to brand Ramallah devolve into Hadid's frustrated, and clever, questioning of what “branding” even means, really, for a city whose problem is not PR but occupation.

Mazria Katz highlights the symbolism of the lit-up multicolored fountain outside city hall, an expression of the civic pride Hadid works tirelessly to bestow on the people of Ramallah. “By the end of the film,” Osit tells Mazria Katz, “when you come to realize the limits of [Hadid]'s power and the circumstances of how the occupation asserts itself, even over his small, dignified city, the fountain becomes a symbol of resistance.”

—*Lucy McKeon*

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