

Made in Palestine

May 3 through October 23, 2003.

Palestinian Artists Working under Siege

"The vast majority of our people are now thoroughly sick of the misfortunes that have befallen us. On the other hand, I have never met a Palestinian who is tired enough of being a Palestinian to give up entirely."

Dr. Edward Said

Upon entering the Made in Palestine exhibition one is immediately drawn in by the sound of footsteps, slightly muffled by rain and occasional traffic noise interspersed with muted conversations. The sounds emanate from Emily Jacir's video installation Crossing Surda. Jacir's first attempt to document the Palestinian experience at the Israeli checkpoint Surda (which separates Ramallah from Birzeit University) was foiled by Israeli soldiers who confiscated her film. On a second try, using a hidden camera aimed at the ground level, Jacir was able to capture the movement of anonymous pedestrians going in both directions. The film is screened on two television monitors placed diagonally opposite each other. The installation forces the visitor to turn his or her body to view both screens, becoming part of a seemingly futile journey back and forth as the pedestrians negotiate puddles of rain water on a road pockmarked with holes. In order to interrupt communication among towns and villages, Israeli military bulldoze Palestinian roads and place rubble and concrete barriers to prevent automobile traffic and further humiliate Palestinians. Irrespective of health conditions, young and old Palestinians are forced to walk, sometimes for about one kilometer, to reach a taxi.

The canvas of Palestinian history has been repeatedly stained by Nakbas, or catastrophes which have marked the lives of generations. My great-grandmother shared with me her vivid recollections of the horror of Turkish rule over Palestine, when Arab nationalists were executed and excessive taxation drained the region's economy. This led to famine and the first wave of immigration to the West. My grandmother recalled the revolt against the British colonialist mandate over Palestine, the women's demonstrations against British Mandate in 1921, with the deportation and imprisonment of Palestinian leaders and intellectuals including my father, who was imprisoned for four years for opposing the British occupation. My mother's memories include the loss of home and country in 1948, when over 726,000 Palestinians were deported and more than 500 villages were destroyed by the Zionists. I grew up in Jerusalem and have lived to tell my children of the loss in 1967 of the remainder of partitioned Palestine.

A brief review of Palestinian art in the last six decades shows a historical timeline of artistic production punctuated by Nakbas and interspersed with short periods of near normal existence when artistic production seemed more diverse in style and content, less focused on the immediate daily tragedies that follow each Israeli military incursion into Palestinian territories. It was during such intervals between the Six-Day War and the first Intifada that artists joined forces to establish art centers in Gaza, Jerusalem, Ramallah, and Birzeit. Among those who worked tirelessly to establish these centers were Vera Tamari, Suleiman

Mansour and Tayseer Barakat.

Just as art exhibitions were becoming a common feature of Palestinian cultural life, Israelis began destroying efforts that promoted Palestinian identity. Newly opened galleries were closed, paintings burned or confiscated, the colors of Palestinian flag censored. Prison art was created under threat of torture or further punishment. After the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Gaza, artists were finally able to travel and join other Palestinian artists in exhibitions in Europe, United States, and other Arab countries. Internationally renowned Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum exhibited her work in Jerusalem, and for the first time Palestinian artists carrying Israeli passports were able to exhibit in Jordan and Egypt. In the de facto annexation of Jerusalem, the Israelis confiscated land around the city and severed it from the rest of the West Bank; as a result Vera Tamari and other artists, like all Palestinians living in West Bank and Gaza, are forbidden entry to Jerusalem. Tamari cannot pray in the Holy Sepulcher or join her colleagues at exhibits at the very art center she helped establish.

In 1969, Palestinian artists in the Diaspora established the first art organization in Beirut.

Under the auspices of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), their art traveled around the world representing the Palestinian resistance. Their works were popularized through hundreds of posters that were distributed in the Arab world and abroad. Ismail Shammout, a leading Palestinian artist, believes Palestinian art is directly linked to the Palestinian cause. "The Palestinian art movement was strong and self-aware when it first saw the light. It had organically linked itself with the masses and it bore the burden of the struggle against Israeli occupation. It is an art of resistance, with all that the word 'resist' implies." Shammout, dedicated over five decades of work to documenting Palestinian life before during and after 1948. For over twenty years, as the Director of the PLO Center for Arts and Culture, he organized exhibitions, conferences, and publications on Palestinian art. Palestinian artists flourished in Beirut until the 1982 Israeli invasion when many had to relocate to other Arab countries. Although they lost the support of the PLO, these artists were active in local Arab art scenes and began to interact with others working in the West Bank and Gaza.

The short-lived respite of semi-normal existence was broken by the steady deterioration of peace negotiations. It finally ended when Ariel Sharon and a large contingency of Israeli soldiers entered the Moslem shrine of the Dome of the Rock in 2000. This blow to peace resulted in the escalation of violence, the Jenin massacre, tragic loss of life on both sides, house demolitions, the uprooting of over 200,000 olive trees, and the total closure of the West Bank and Gaza. A twenty-foot high apartheid wall now isolates the ever-shrinking Palestinian territories. At the start of the second Intifada, Palestinian artists joined other cultural activists in peaceful demonstrations calling for democracy and secular government. Carrying paintings and brushes, artists demanded the preservation of life and an end to martyrdom and death. Facing bewildered Israeli soldiers they sang, played music and danced.

Compared to artists working in other Arab countries, Palestinian artists are not an elitist group. Their art reflects an awareness of their social responsibility, dictated by the exigencies of their daily struggle to survive. Their experience is more immediate and direct than their fellow artists in the Diaspora. Almost all the artists participating in Made in Palestine have experienced life under Israeli military occupation. Normal life is unattainable for all Palestinians. Days pass without running water or electricity. Food shortages, curfews, school closures, road closures, and humiliation at check-points established at random make daily life a nightmare for citizens of all ages. The fact that artists, dancers, musicians and actors continue to work under these conditions is a reflection of the indomitable strength of the Palestinian people.

The first and second Intifadas inspired several artists living in the West to return to Palestine to exhibit and work with their colleagues. As a result, the work of these artists has taken new direction. Some now focus exclusively on Palestinian themes. Samia Halaby grew up in Jerusalem and immigrated to the United States in her teens. Halaby's abstract expressionist work in a collage of color is intended to represent the topography of Palestine, from the yellow desert boundaries along the Jordan River to the turquoise blue of the Mediterranean Sea. In Palestine, From the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River Halaby's canvas collage coalesces into a beautiful landscape, split and shattered as a result of the unrelenting drawing and redrawing of Palestinian boundaries. The artwork evokes memories of the pre-1967 landscape of the hills around Jerusalem, where anemones and poppies, thyme and rosemary, chamomile and mint once carpeted the hills in seasonal panoramas of color. Now stark Israeli settlements and commercial buildings encircle the Holy City.

Emily Jacir's refugee tent, Memorial to 418 Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948, is a symbol of the loss of historical Palestine. It asserts the legitimate right of return for the 726,000 Palestinians dispossessed in 1948. The number of Palestinians living in exile is currently estimated at almost 4 million. The tent also symbolizes the lack of permanence that characterizes the lives of refugees, a period of transition referred to as ghorba or living among strangers and waiting for repatriation. Jacir invited friends in the ghorba of New York to sew the names of Palestinian villages. This collaborative work is an affirmation of Palestinian human rights. Free of knots at beginning or end, the threads left hanging at the end of each village or town's name create an almost surreal image of villages erased, yet ever present in the consciousness of Palestinians.

John Halaka may not pay annual visits to his ancestral home, yet like many others who are unable to visit as often as they would like, he retains his cultural compass in his piece Stripped of Their Identity and Driven from Their Land. A fitting background to Jacir's tent, the drawing depicts refugees and victims of ethnic cleansing in Palestine, Bosnia, Kosovo, Armenia, Germany, the United States, and many others. The imposing scale and depth of this work (8' high and 22' wide) and the anonymity of the figures underscore the horrific outcome of dispossessing, eliminating, or expelling inhabitants from their land in order to replace them with other ethnic or religious entities. Human figures are created from the

repeated imprint of a single rubber stamp that spells “Forgotten Survivors”.

Suffurya by Mervat Essa, deals with the same theme. Her clay objects in the shape of sacks or buqag hold only the most precious of all possessions and lie at the base of a photograph of the depopulated and erased village of Bir’am. The installation is dreamlike, an archeology of memory not yet ready to be excavated. The sacks, fossils of lives suddenly interrupted, await their owners return.

Rana Bishara’s Blindfolded History contributes another narrative. Fifty sheets of glass hang from the gallery ceiling, positioned in tenuous close proximity and reaching eye level. Visitors are obliged to look at each silk-screened image while carefully maneuvering between the glass sheets in a heightened sense of discomfiting closeness. The images, photographs of the Palestinian chronicle beginning in 1948 and ending in the Intifada of 2003, are screened in chocolate. A common Arabic phrase refers to the good times as dunia helweh, life is sweet. In this work, Bishara juxtaposes sweet and sorrow, the subject of an earlier work of hers involving opposites, cactus leaves half-dipped in chocolate. Bishara’s successful use of medium as message is powerful testament to her ability to transform materials.

Tayseer Barakat’s work dedicated to his Father is an old filing cabinet discarded by the Israeli army. The oversized drawers contained records kept of the first European Jewish settlers arriving from Europe in the 1930s. Barakat imprinted the stages in his father’s life, from his childhood in his ancestral home until his death as a refugee, in each drawer. The burned figures evoke cave markings or steles, which he believes echo stories of grief, defeat, or contentment.”

Barakat is one of the many artists who uses natural local materials to construct their work. Other artists experiment with local material traditionally used in crafts such as olive wood, olive pits, vegetable dyes, olive oil soap, leather, clay, and dry cactus, with its sturdy web of fiber. Cactus, a hardy plant, was often planted in place of fences to mark boundaries of properties and keep animals out. It continues to be a common symbol of Palestinian Sumoud or steadfastness. Sabar, which means “cactus,” also translates as “patience.”

Abdel Rahmen Muzayen comes from a family of painters and poets, and he draws in his art on his background in archeology and his extensive research into Palestinian history and culture. Muzayen studied under Ismail Shammout in the city of Lydd before their expulsion to Gaza in 1948. He lost his entire life work first in 1967, then again in the 1982 Israeli invasion of Beirut. In 1993 he returned to Gaza. His work Jenin 2002 is a memorial to the Jenin massacre and destruction of the refugee camp in Jenin.

His exquisite ink drawings on personal and public narratives confirm that he is a master of form. Using hardly any sharp or jagged lines, he shapes, predominantly with curves, the

compartments that tell each story. The female figure of Anat, a Canaanite goddess, is central to most of the drawings. Her body arches gracefully in the shape of a crescent moon to protect the vulnerable Palestinian families, homes, and palm trees. A resolute and steadfast Anat embodies hope for a better future, always looking away from the demolished houses of Jenin. The architectural details in Muzayen's works are a tribute to Palestinian stonemasons who skillfully sculpted rough stones from the quarries in Bethlehem and Nablus. Before the occupation, the sounds of metal shaping stone in rhythm were heard all over the West Bank. Now the stone artisans are silenced and their work lies in rubble.

Palestinian artist and art historian Tina Sherwell has investigated the representation of women in Palestinian art. The pioneering artist Ismail Shammout was the first to use the Palestinian woman as a symbol for the homeland. References made to land in the shape of the female figure dominate the art of two of the artists in this exhibition who began painting in Israeli prisons. In the works by Muhammad Rakouie and Zuhdi al Adawi, the female figure is adorned with the Palestinian flag. In contrast, Mary Tuma's chooses the shape of the traditional dresses to render indirectly the reality of gender inequalities. Hung from the ceiling, the dresses stand tall and proud. Sewn from one continuous piece of black chiffon fabric fifty yards long, and stripped of the colorful embroidery that adorns traditional Palestinian costumes, these dresses embody the steadfastness of the Palestinian women in the face of daily injustices at home and under occupation, and their response to the loss of their children to martyrdom. This site-specific installation was first exhibited at Al Wasiti Gallery in Jerusalem to memorialize those born in the city but never able to re-enter it.

Abdul Hay Mussalam, a sixty-nine year old self-taught artist, lives in a refugee camp in Jordan and shapes figures on flat surfaces, using sawdust and glue to portray memories of idyllic pastoral life in Palestine. One work, full of colorful details, depicts a traditional Palestinian wedding and contrasts with a monotone piece dedicated to Palestinian women. In the latter, dated 1985, Mussalam includes the following inscription in English: "The emancipation of women is not an act of charity but a fundamental necessity of the revolution." In a video interview with the curators, he praised the Palestinian women's role and acknowledged his wife's support for his work and their close collaboration.

Mustafa al Hallaj establishes a dialectical relationship between the mythical and the real, between good and evil in his apocalyptic and monumental work. Self-portrait as Man, God, the Devil is a frieze-like epic consisting of masonite-cut prints hung in eight rows. It epitomizes the Palestinian tragedy, and it chronicles the mythological figures of Palestinian folktales, making references to gins and ghouls. Hallaj began his career as a sculptor. He studied in Egypt and was influenced by the works of Alexandrian artist Effat Nagui and her husband Saad al-Khadim, who studied Egyptian magic and folklore dating back to ancient Egypt. Nagui's metaphysical imagery included a mixed media of magic symbols, including crocodile skins she gathered from Upper Egypt and Ethiopia.

Ashraf Fawakhry, like Rana Bishara and Mervat Essa, is a citizen of Israel. He grew up in Haifa, a seaside town known for its large Arab population and for the long tradition of

peaceful co-existence between its Arab and Jewish population. Fawakhry's series of small images are decorated with fragments of advertisement photos, cuts from packages, personal collectibles, and embellished with Hebrew and Arabic script. A sort of miniature Palestinian Pop Art, each piece bears the imprint of a donkey-- long a symbol of endurance.

For many years Adnan Yahya has produced numerous oil-on-canvas paintings that depict a world of tortured, disfigured bodies. Within this Francis Bacon-like vision of an almost uninhabitable world, many of these figures embody personalities that we know and encounter. In the piece USA, he depicts two figures, a caricatured figure of Ariel Sharon and the graphic, severed, bloody head of a child.

Prior to the end of the nineteenth-century, most photographers whose subject was Palestine were from Europe or America, and these photographers constructed an Orient from the very images they produced. It was only in the last century that Palestinian photographers began to document their own society, and began a tradition of producing a photographic record of Palestinian life. These photographers first focused on portrait photography, then architecture and landscape, and more recently on Palestinian life under occupation.

Noel Jabbour's Vacant Seats are intimate portraits of untold suffering. Using light and shadow to avoid a documentary style, she portrays anguished families mourning the loss of children, mothers, husbands, and brothers. These families stare out beyond the camera taking the viewer's attention away from their immediate surroundings and into a future that is uncharted and beyond their control.

Rula Halawani maintains the tradition of documenting the occupation. Braving Israeli bullets, she recorded the first instant in the life of a devastated family who lost family members, all their life savings and belongings, as well as their home. In this Negative Incursion series, Halawani prints the images in negative which has the effect of leaving the gruesome details of the massacre to our imagination and making the viewer an active witness of the atrocities. The following lines by the Lebanese poet Etel Ednan serve as an apt tribute for the survivors who live the rest of the lives mourning family, neighbor, home, and life:

They started with the olive trees,
Then with the orchards,
Then, with the buildings,
And when all had disappeared,
They threw, one on top of the other,
The children, the old and the newly-weds,
In a mass grave,
All that to tell the world of the half-dead
That we didn't exist,
That we have never existed,

**And therefore that they were right
To exterminate us all.**

Since the beginning of the Intifada, Palestinian art centers have maintained their staffs and continued to operate. When curfews are lifted and incursions stop, they invite visiting artists and organize lectures, films and children's art classes. For many, these centers provide the only diversion, although, with 65% of the population unemployed and 75% below the poverty line of \$2.00 per day, hardly any sales of art occur. Visual artists receive very little support from the Palestinian Authority. A few non-governmental organizations and private foundations offer some support in the form of exhibition space or limited awards, the artists have to rely on their own resources. Frequent closures isolate those living in other areas such as Gaza or Bethlehem region. Unable to find or buy art supplies, several artists have begun working with natural and local products. Suleiman Mansour uses straw and mud, which he substitutes for imported oils and acrylics as a form of resistance. In I, Ismael, his abstract human figures recede into the dry caked clay, evoking the story of Hagar and Ismael lost in the desert without water. The roses growing in this desolate environment symbolize young Palestinian lives shabab zay al-ward, or the "flowers of youth" lost in the Intifada.

Palestinians have an ancient tradition of pottery hand-made by women. Pottery was first introduced to the Levant in the sixth century B.C. Examples of works have been found in areas known for their good sources of clay, such as Jericho. More recently, women began reviving this tradition as a small source of income. Vera Tamari experiments with different styles and type of clay and sculpts small intimate objects of figures. Her installation Tale of a Tree consists of rows of six hundred miniature clay trees, painted in pastel colors. These trees float on the top of a Plexiglas shelf at the base of a black-and-white image of an old olive tree. They represent hope for the future and confidence in the past. Tamari's miniature sculptures draw attention to the need to protect and conserve the olive trees and natural resources. Israelis have targeted olive production since the occupation began, cutting or burning the trees, and preventing Palestinian farmers from picking the olives. Olive oil is the main agricultural product for the Palestinians, and the loss of olive trees has devastated the Palestinian economy.

In 2002, during the first major incursion into Ramallah, Israeli soldiers destroyed over six hundred private vehicles including ambulances. Tamari, who never builds large-scale sculptures, towed ten crushed cars to a high-school playground and constructed an installation, wiring loudspeakers and lights to the cars and decorating them with beaded amulets like the ones drivers hang from rearview mirrors to protect their cars from the evil eye. Her installation was in full view of the soldiers. During the curfew, Tamari sat in her home across from the school and watched with amusement the soldiers' reactions to this huge installation with its lights and blaring music. The jarring combination of destroyed vehicles and joyful music was not lost on the soldiers. This is another example of how living under occupation has led artists to search for new materials and adapt to new situations. Not limited by art movements or market demands; Palestinian artists feel free to experiment

and challenge existing trends.

Throughout the history of colonized nations, culture has played a vital role in shaping collective identity. The arts played an essential role in portraying and promoting the peoples' national struggle in Egypt and Algeria. Visual arts as well as literature, especially poetry and other arts, gave voice to the national aspiration of the oppressed. Egyptian artists drew on symbols from Pharoanic Egypt and folkloric traditions to emphasize national pride in their history and culture. Symbols of Palestinian culture first became popular in poetry, and each one of these symbols is pregnant with allusions and memories for millions of Palestinians and others familiar with Palestinian culture. . Artworks in the Made in Palestine exhibition make several references to Palestinian cultural symbols; embedded in all printed and electronic media, these symbols are now part of the Palestinian national psyche. Among these iconic images are the Dome of the Rock, pigeons of peace, the kuffiyah or checkered men's headdress, and the map of Palestine.

For the last fifty years Palestinian artists have created a visual vocabulary of new symbols.

Palestinian art is an assertion of identity and a beacon of hope for Palestinian families. Almost every Palestinian home displays posters or small inexpensive prints of original artwork that portray their struggle for survival. These contain figurative images not dissimilar to those found in Muzayen's work or the prisoners' art. The historical map of Palestine is carved, painted, collaged, engraved, or embroidered, in an endless variety of media and designs from gold, to olive wood products. One can purchase these items at any craft shop in West Bank, Jordan, Beirut, or as far west as Rabat, Morocco, and at every Palestinian gathering in the Diaspora. A 1960s painting by Joumana Hussein, a leading Palestinian artist, portrayed a wedding ceremony in the shape of the map of Palestine, and forty years later, the shadow of the map appears in the background of several layers of acrylic in her abstract work. The historic map represents a potent symbol insofar as it refuses to yield to partitions, settlements, road maps, or lands divided by apartheid walls.

The centuries-old Palestinian crafts of embroidery, hand-blown glass, ceramics, and woodcarving are now exported as Israeli crafts, and the history of these crafts is intentionally omitted from labels. Elements of Palestinian culture are at constant risk of being transformed and obliterated. Mahmoud Darwish believes that Israelis are in constant denial of Palestinian culture: "Israelis accept us as an obstacle, as a feature of the landscape, but culturally speaking, they don't want to accept us. They deny our existence in the past, as if the country was empty for 2,000 years." Israeli exhibitors generally sanction Palestinian art that endorses the official colonial narrative, further limiting Palestinian artistic expression. However, in recent years progressive Israeli film festivals have begun to include films representing the Palestinian narrative. Arian Littman-Cohen, an Israeli artist who saw films by Elia Suleiman and Mona Hatoum (Measures of Distance, 1988,) was moved by the power of their art: " ...as I stepped out of the illusory space of Elia Suleiman's excellent movie Chronicle of Disappearance, I once again felt the enormous complexity of our common existence. Today I realize that it was Mona's [Hatoum] strong visual language that triggered my desire to listen to her, and that it was within and through the space of her artwork that I began to empathize with her subjectivity."

Exhibiting contemporary art from the Arab world in the United States is a challenge for any curator. Without extensive didactic text, the work may give rise to misinterpretations or leave the viewers without a clue as to its meaning or message. In spite of the universal themes in Palestinian art, it is often usually misinterpreted as political propaganda. While a similar exhibition from other minority cultures maybe addressed in a straightforward manner, Palestinian culture is at a disadvantage in the United States. For almost a century, Palestinian and Arab culture in general has been misunderstood and unfavorably portrayed in the Western media. Arab opinion is censored, much of what is read about Arab culture is written by non-Arabs, and the contemporary artistic production of the region is rarely if ever taken seriously.

As a result, exhibitions that open the way for others find it necessary to educate and give a voice to the artists and the people.

What is unique about the Made in Palestine exhibition is that, for the first time, American curators took the initiative to visit Palestinian artists in their studios, select the artwork, invite the artists to speak, and ensure the integrity of the work. At a time of frequent and intense Israeli incursions into Palestinian territories, the curators risked their lives to meet the artists and learn about the conditions under which they work. This exhibition is not a comprehensive survey of Palestinian art but rather a selection of work by artists the curators were able to reach despite the dangers posed by the threat of American advances into Iraq and border closures by Israel.

The art in this exhibition gives us insight into the humanity of the Palestinian culture and legitimizes the visitors' right to hear the Palestinian narrative. We can only hope that the curators' courage and respect for human rights becomes contagious. As long as the Palestinians continue to be dispossessed and dehumanized, Palestinian artists will continue to give a voice to their people. Peace may become a reality when both sides respect each other's culture, when Israeli children are allowed to read Mahmoud Darwish and visit exhibits such as Made in Palestine, and Palestinians are free to visit galleries in Jaffa and Tel Aviv.

Notes

Ismail Shammout. Written communication with the author. Kuwait, 1987.

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Preface... Gabriel Delgado, James Harithas, Tex Kerschen
Introduction, James Harithas, Director, Station
A Land Without a People...Tarif Abboushi
Allan Antliff
Palestinian Artists Working Under Siege... Salwa Mikdadi-Nashashibi
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