

# “Made in Palestine”: A Stirring Art Exhibit Rocks Houston and Hits the Road

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***Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, November 2003, pages 32-33**

**Special Report**

***By Delinda C. Hanley***

Jim Harithas and the curators at The Station, a contemporary arts museum in Houston, Texas took a chance when they decided to organize the first museum-quality exhibition of contemporary art of Palestine in either Europe or the Middle East. With media coverage of the region focusing primarily on Palestinian suicide attacks or Israel's campaign to assassinate Palestinian leaders or build a wall across the occupied territories, would the exhibit provoke outrage or dialogue in Houston's Jewish and Arab-American communities? Could a cultural exhibit succeed where political exchange has failed to explain Palestinian aspirations to American audiences?

"One of the best ways to understand people is through their art and literature," noted Dr. Azar Nafisi, a visiting professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, in a June 27 *Christian Science Monitor* article on the Houston exhibit. "It shows them in more humane terms—as living, breathing people who fall in and out of love."

From the exhibit's gala opening on May 3 to its closing reception on Oct. 3,

2003, thousands of American visitors have had the chance to see scenes of Palestinian love and loss as they poured through the doors of the museum. Among those moved by the modern and postmodern works have been many members of Houston's 65,000-strong Arab-American community, former Secretary of State James A. Baker III, former Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, and Cindy and Craig Corrie, parents of murdered American peace activist Rachel Corrie. The exhibit's diverse paintings, sculptures, videos, textiles, ceramics, and photography all express the Palestinians' longing for liberation from Israeli occupation.

The stirring exhibition follows the history of the Palestinian people from the Nakba of 1948, to the first and second intifadas, and their current dreams for a homeland. It's all there: the pain, struggle, blood, humiliation, pride and, most of all, hope.

Along with the Palestinian artists whose work is represented, show organizers Gabriel Delgado, Jim Harithas and Tex Kerschen faced some daunting roadblocks of their own trying to enter the occupied territories. They spent a month in the Middle East meeting artists, finally selecting works by 23 Palestinians. They then had to battle for transportation and travel visas for the artists, only 10 of whom were able to make it to Houston for the opening.

The show is unforgettable. Vera Tamari's ceramic work "Tale of a Tree" pays tribute to the thousands of ancient olive trees destroyed by Israeli settlers and military forces. For years Tamari clipped newspaper articles about the wanton destruction of the olive tree, not only an essential food staple but a symbol of Palestinians' attachment to their land. One day she began to reconstruct those trees using colorful clay.

"Stripped of Their Identity and Driven From Their Land," a drawing by San Diego's John Halaka, memorializes the diaspora of the Palestinian people.

The figures' cultural anonymity invites the viewer to project his or her own cultural history onto the image. The drawing, created with acrylic paint, and rubber-stamped prints of the phrase "Forgotten Survivors" depicts Palestinians' forced marches from their homes, bringing to mind the Cherokee Trail of Tears.

Rula Halawani, who teaches photography at Birzeit University in the West Bank, filmed acts of brutality as Israeli soldiers rampaged through the streets of Ramallah. Her images are printed in the negative, forcing viewers to pay close attention to the devastation she captured on film.

Emily Jacir's "Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated, and Occupied by Israel in 1948" consists of a rough refugee tent, similar to any that may be seen today near demolished homes in refugee camps. Israeli scholars have only recently begun to admit that between 600,000 and 700,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes, and 418 Palestinian villages destroyed, in 1948. Most Israelis and Americans grew up believing the myth that Palestinians left of their own accord.

Jacir, who also teaches at Birzeit, and 140 others painstakingly embroidered the names of every lost village in Palestine. "Lawyers, bankers, filmmakers, dentists, consultants, musicians, playwrights, artists, human rights activists, and teachers" sewed the names on the tent, she noted. Both Palestinians who came from these villages, and Israelis who grew up on their remains, mourned and paid homage as they embroidered the heavy fabric in Jacir's studio.

Poignant crayon images drawn on pillowcases by Zuhdi Al-Adawi and Muhammad Rakouie during their Israeli imprisonment, along with many other telling works, finally may open the eyes of Americans who with their tax dollars are helping to prolong Palestinian suffering.

For information on the traveling exhibition's venues in Canada, then, back in the U.S., in New York and Detroit—or to arrange its appearance in a local museum—contact James Harithas, director of the Ineri Foundation, chief curator Tex Kerschen, or exhibit curator Gabriel Delgado at (713) 529-6900.

*Delinda C. Hanley is news editor of the Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, on Middle East Affairs.*

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