

An abstract painting by Kamal Boullata, featuring a dense, textured composition of dark, swirling lines and patches of light, earthy tones. The overall effect is one of intense energy and movement, with a sense of depth and complexity. The colors range from deep blacks and browns to lighter, almost white, areas, creating a rich, layered visual experience.

# PALESTINIAN ART

From 1850 to the Present

**Kamal Boullata**

Preface by  
**John Berger**



the status quo. Thus, while their countrymen from the camps had 'refugee status' that did not allow them work permits, the Palestinian Ras Beirut artists, a number of whom were granted Lebanese citizenship, could openly earn their living from their art.

Work by Ras Beirut artists patronized by Lebanese, Arab and foreign collectors was exhibited in Beirut's Sursock Museum and commercial art galleries and was often included in international exhibitions representing Lebanon. And while there were hardly any women among the refugee camp artists, the Ras Beirut artists boasted a number who won wide recognition.

A number of refugee artists from Palestine's urban centres associated with the Ras Beirut art scene lived in Beirut only intermittently, though for protracted periods. These include Maliha Afnan, Rita Daoud, Laila al-Shawwa, Vladimir Tamari and Kamal Boullata. The three artists discussed below – Jumana al-Husseini, Juliana Seraphim and Paul Guiragossian – all lived in Beirut permanently. Their entire art careers were carved out in the city and their work was part and parcel of Lebanon's art movement. Husseini was exceptional in openly identifying with her compatriots from the refugee camps, while both Seraphim and Guiragossian, who were publicly recognized as Lebanese artists, generally kept their Palestinian identity in the shadows. Their art, however, did not cease to reveal different facets of their Palestinian experience.

### Jumana al-Husseini (b. 1932)

In 1948, when a bomb hit Jumana al-Husseini's home outside the walls of Jerusalem's Old City, her family went to wait out the storm in Beirut. Husseini young men and women had been sent to Beirut for higher education since the turn of the century, and the family maintained relations there from earlier sojourns. Indeed, Jumana, the youngest of the Husseini girls, had been taken to Beirut when she was four and lived there for a number of years: her father, the nationalist leader Jamal al-Husseini, had been exiled by the British following the Palestinian revolt of 1936–9 and had sought refuge in Beirut along with other Palestinian leaders, including his second cousin the mufti of Jerusalem. Beirut was thus not new to the sixteen-year-old refugee from this notable Jerusalem family which had played a pivotal role in Palestinian public life for two centuries.<sup>11</sup>

Jumana al-Husseini spent most of her adult life in Beirut. In 1954, the American University of Beirut opened a Department of Fine Arts that offered an alternative to the more conventional art classes given at other local art institutions. For the first time art was 'taught according to formal, not stylistic principles'.<sup>12</sup> Husseini, by then the mother of a two-year-old, enrolled at the

*Facing page:*

**Jumana al-Husseini**

*Composition*, 1994

Mixed media on canvas

11. For further reading on the al-Husseini family, see Ilan Pappé, 'The Rise and Fall of the Husaynis 1840–1922' (Part I), in *Jerusalem Quarterly File*, 10, autumn 2000, pp. 27–38 and (part II) in 11–12, winter–spring 2001, pp. 52–67. See also Serene Husseini Shahid, *Jerusalem Memories*, Beirut 2000.

12. Carswell, 'The Lebanese Vision', p. 18. It is interesting to note that the opening of AUB's art department where Maryette Charlton and George Bueher from the Art Institute of Chicago taught, coincided with the CIA's covert campaign to lure established and young artists and intellectuals in thirty-five countries (including Lebanon) toward a more accommodating view of the 'American way'. See Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War*, New York 1999.





**Juliana Seraphim**  
*Untitled*, 1970–84  
 Etching on copper, 50 x 40 cm

13. From a personal interview in Paris, 29 March 1997.

in Beirut, the home in which she raised her children, the Jerusalem of her childhood never ceased to be the central theme of her figurative painting. In Paris, however, within a few years, Hussein's art moved away from all traces of figurative representation. Emerging from dark layers of transparent paint overlapping geometric fragments of collage, the viewer could discern the traces of hand-written Arabic words. When asked about her new abstractions, Hussein described them as 'letters to my mother who is buried in Jerusalem'.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Juliana Seraphim (b. 1934)**

Born in Jaffa, Juliana Seraphim was fourteen years old when her native city was besieged by the Zionist forces. Fleeing by fishing boat up the Lebanese coast, the



**Juliana Seraphim**  
*Maritime Landscape II*, 1974  
 Oil on canvas, 110 x 120 cm

family waited in the southern Lebanese city of Saida for the violence to subside. Four years later, when it became clear that there would be no return, the Seraphims moved to Beirut where they started a new life. There, the family's eldest daughter found a job as a secretary at UNRWA, one of the few places where Palestinian refugees in Lebanon could be employed.

When Seraphim arrived in Beirut in 1952, the city's rapid transformation into a regional economic centre and vital metropolis had just begun. Public interest in art grew with the spreading affluence. Seraphim, attracted to the visual arts, began taking private lessons with the Lebanese painter Jean Khalifeh (1923–78). Her earliest work was introduced to the public through exhibitions at Khalifeh's studio. Within a few years, she was a prominent member of the Ras Beirut art circle, and her paintings were displayed at Beirut's leading art spaces including Galerie Licorne. Together with Hussein, she was invited in 1961 to participate in the first Salon d'Automne at the Sursock Museum. Between 1958 and 1965, she won protracted sojourns in Florence, Madrid and Paris. Eventually, the Palestinian-born artist, who was able to live from her painting, went on to represent Lebanon in international exhibitions, including the biennials of Alexandria in 1962, Paris in 1963 and São Paulo in 1965.

Unlike Hussein, Seraphim remained aloof from her compatriots from the camps. Yet it is possible to see how her work shared surrealist traits and affinities with Hallaj's. As much as the camp artist was obsessed with death, however,





Juliana Seraphim  
*Maritime Landscape I*, 1974  
 Oil on canvas, 110 x 120 cm

Seraphim was with the joy of living. Like other feminists of her generation who lived in Beirut during this period, including the cultural worker Janine Rbeiz and the novelists Laila Ba'albaki and Ghada al-Samman, the discovery of the world began with that of the body and thence political freedom was asserted through the freedom to love.

Believing that the inner self is the fountainhead of all images, Seraphim, like Hallaj, delved into the furthest corners of her subliminal world to recover a visual language from some dormant memory. While Hallaj's surreal images mirrored the nightmarish reality he was living, Seraphim's art, which became a channel for self-discovery, captured the traces of a dream gleaming with fantastic imagery.

Through an intrinsically improvised style, wherein the line between drawing and painting was often blurred, she not only disregarded formal pictorial conventions but also deliberately defied all forms of mental censorship. In the process, dream and fantasy surged from her drawings, engravings, and paintings divulging – through the free association of adjacent forms – a wide range of biomorphic compositions. With her semi-figurative suggestions of human anatomy and winged being, the liquefied realm she created was satiated with erotic connotations.

The ethereal quality of Seraphim's fantasies challenged all sense of gravity in a way that may recall Hallaj's figures suspended in a bottomless space. Her erotically suggestive imagery with seashell forms, exotic plants with translucent

petals assuming the shades of flesh, scorned social taboos as much as 'Ali's cartoons defied political conformities. If Husseini's idealized cityscapes seemed to emerge from a childhood reverie, Seraphim's imagined dream worlds seemed to retrace objects and sites remembered from a childhood spent between seashore and orange grove.

Years later, when asked about the source of her imagery, Seraphim recalled how as a child she used to spend weekends in Jerusalem with her grandfather, whose home had once been a convent. She mentioned how the domed ceilings of her grandfather's house bore traces of colourful frescos that evoked the apparition of supernatural beings. These frescos filled the little girl with awe and mystery, marking her for the rest of her life.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in her work we see – as in a dream – how impressions from a Jerusalem ceiling dissolve into seashells collected by the Jaffa shore. Through free association she affiliated the details of a place remembered with the intimate parts of her own body.

#### Paul Guiragossian (1926–1993)

Of all the Palestinian artists of his generation, Paul Guiragossian was unquestionably the one whose career was most highly rewarded in Beirut. A prolific artist and the recipient of Lebanon's highest honours, he was perhaps the most widely exhibited talent in Lebanon, with solo and group exhibitions in major cities of the Arab world and the West as well. He enjoyed the patronage of the city's elite, and his work found its way into all the big Lebanese private and national collections.<sup>15</sup>

Born in Jerusalem to an Armenian family, the son of a blind fiddler who used to sing at weddings and social occasions, Guiragossian was three years old when Catholic monks took him in. Until he was seventeen, he was a boarder in Jerusalem's Franciscan convent and received his formal education at its charity school. With his innate talent for drawing, the boy was later sent to spend his last four years of school as an apprentice of religious painting at the studio of the Catholic mission's resident Italian painter. His apprenticeship was later to secure him a job for two years as an assistant to an ageing Armenian icon painter in the Old City. With the death of his father and the escalating violence in Palestine, Beirut seemed the ideal place for the ambitious young man to seek refuge, especially since family lore had made much of the success of an older relative who had moved there decades earlier.<sup>16</sup>

With his family, the twenty-one-year-old Guiragossian settled in Beirut's suburb of Burj Hammoud. In that dingy and remote neighbourhood, the city's most impoverished population survived along with the Armenian refugee

14. Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, Beirut 1987, pp. 71–8.

15. Lebanon's adoption of the Jerusalem Armenian Paul Guiragossian makes for an interesting comparison with Israel's adoption of another minority Palestinian artist, the Druze Abdallah al-Qarra (b. 1939). While the voluntary adoption secured financial success for both artists during the same period, Guiragossian never privately or publicly denied his Palestinian roots, whereas al-Qarra has gone so far as to change his Arabic name 'Abdallah' to the Hebrew equivalent 'Ovadia'. For Guiragossian's position see his interview with Tawfiq Sayigh in which he candidly spoke of how his earliest experiences in Jerusalem were an ongoing inspiration in his art in *al-Fannanun al-Lubnaniyyun yatahaddathun 'an fannihem* (Lebanese Artists Speak about their Art), *Hiwar*, 26–7, March–April 1967, pp. 150–67. On al-Qarra's position see Susan Slymovics, *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village*, Philadelphia 1988, pp. 67–71.

16. The Jerusalem-born Abraham Guiragossian (1871–1956), who became a photographic assistant to Adrien Bonfils, was later to make a small fortune after he bought out Maison Bonfils, originally established by Felix Bonfils, the leading photographer of the region at the turn of the century. See Carney E. S. Gavin *The Image of the East: Nineteenth-Century Near Eastern Photographs by Bonfils: From the Collection of the Harvard Semitic Museum*, Chicago 1982.



## 'Defiant Memory'

The year 1982, when Beirut was besieged and then occupied by the Israeli army, witnessed the dispersal of the Palestinian artists who once had found refuge there. Except for Guiragossian, who remained in Beirut until his death, and Seraphim, who lives in the city to this day, all the other artists left. The cultural centre that nourished the first generation of Palestinian refugee artists was no more.

Palestinian art had to grub its survival under new and different skies. Memory continued to play a central role in the works of the subsequent generations of artists born both outside Palestine and in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Without any cultural centre to bring artists together, Palestinian art developed along different paths. It is interesting to note that, soon after the 1948 debacle, the closer the artists lived to the home culture and country of birth, the more figurative their art was, and the further away they settled the more their art evolved into abstraction.

In the meantime, the Beirut that was called in its golden decades 'the lung of the Arab world' was destined to fall into amnesia in an effort to move beyond the civil war that killed between 100,000 and 150,000 of its people. Today, no traces remain of the Tal al-Za'atar refugee camp, and Sabra and Shatila are devastated ruins. There is not a single monument in the country for the dead. Nostalgia for an earlier time seems to be the cure of choice to bind the wounds of the city's implosion.<sup>19</sup>

No matter how alluring nostalgia may be, the Beirut experience cannot be repeated. Not because 'nostalgia is not what it used to be', in Simone Signoret's famous phrase, but because the Beirut that was at the centre of the Arab world during its most critical decades in modern history has lost its own centre. The fate of the two currents that formed the major schools of thought in those crucial years is echoed in the fate of Beirut's two main squares, Martyrs' Square and Star Square. The first had been seen by the people of Beirut as the heart of their city since the end of the nineteenth century, and the second is the site of the Lebanese parliament. After the war, the huge square that commemorates national memory, and which traditionally formed the link between East and West Beirut, was razed to the ground, whereas the parliamentary site, originally built by the French as a miniature of the Parisian square of the same name, was renovated.<sup>20</sup>

Beirut may not have been present in the work of the generation of Palestinian artists who spent the prime of their lives in the city. The memory of home was the driving force giving body to their art. Memory also was the legacy the first generation of refugee artists passed on to the next.

During those 'Beirut decades', the Palestinian national struggle was central

19. For a sampling of a single year's publications (which, interestingly, appear in French) of coffee-table books that induce nostalgia for earlier times, see Claire Paget, *Murs et plafonds peints: Liban XIX siècle*, Beirut 1998; Houda Kassatly, *De pierres et de couleurs: Vie et mort des maisons du vieux Beyrouth*, Beirut 1998; and Houda Kassatly, *Si proche, si extremes: Rituels en sursis du Liban et de Syrie*, Beirut 1998.

20. See 'al-madina dhat al-sahatain' (City of Two Squares) in Jad Tabet, *al-i'mar wa-l-maslaha al-'amma* (Building Development and Public Interest), Beirut 1997, pp. 105–24.



**Juliana Seraphim**

*Femme-fleur*, 1972

Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm

**Juliana Seraphim**

*Femme-fleur*, 1966

Oil on canvas, 100 x 80 cm

Georges Ghosn Collection, Beirut

in book form (without Seraphim's drawings) Ba'albaki was faced with a highly publicized trial for 'indecenty', which she eventually won.<sup>22</sup>

With sweeping brush strokes and hairline drawings she gave shape to agile bodies and winged beings floating amid pools of imaginary orchards. Spontaneous brush marks turn a wave into an leaf and the plumage of imaginary birds fuses with waves and seashells dissolving wings and water into each other within an aureole of translucent colours. Often, through her winged beings, which can be seen as a subconscious tribute to the biblical origins of Seraphim's family name, we see a woman's face emerging behind bridal veils.<sup>23</sup> While the 'bride' often denotes the coastal city of her birth in Palestinian vernacular, in Seraphim's paintings the bride's facial features invariably reflect her own.

### **Mona Hatoum (b. 1952)**

Born in Beirut, Mona Hatoum is the third and youngest daughter of Palestinian refugees from Haifa. A London resident for more than twenty years, she is the foremost Palestinian woman artist in the international art scene. In 1975, when the Lebanese civil war erupted, Hatoum was visiting Europe for the first time. Due to the subsequent nine-month closure of Beirut airport, the twenty-three-year-old graduate of Beirut University College (today the American University of Beirut) was unable to return home and begin her art studies as planned. In London, she was admitted instead to Byam Shaw School of Art, which she attended for four years. After completing her studies, she went on to London's Slade School of Fine Art from which she graduated in 1981. Hatoum, whose work has been exhibited in prominent galleries and major museums in Paris, London, Berlin, Madrid, New York, Montreal, Sydney and Hong Kong (among other cities), has

22. See Seraphim's erotic drawings and Ba'albaki's 'Safinat Hanan ila-l-Qamar' (A Vessel of Tenderness to the Moon), *Hiwar*, 4, May-June 1963, pp. 22-8. It is noteworthy that every issue of this short-lived but influential literary quarterly edited by Palestinian poet Tawfiq Sayigh (1923-71) and published in Beirut (1962-7) contained at least one if not two pieces by women writers. Some issues also discussed works of women artists accompanied by black and white reproductions of their work. As for Laila Ba'albaki's trial, it took place on 27 June 1964 before Lebanon's Publications Court which charged her on the basis of 'indecent references and statements' in her book published by George Ghorayyeb in Sept. 1963. Following an independent campaign waged by members of Lebanon's intelligentsia, who supported the novelist's right to freedom of expression, the Court of Appeals verdict of 23 July 1964 pronounced Ba'albaki innocent and ordered all confiscated copies returned to their owners.

23. The artist's family name Seraphim etymologically derives from the Hebrew plural of the word seraph. It refers to the guardian angels of God's throne. See Isaiah 6:1-3. In Byzantine and Islamic art, these supreme angels are commonly represented with as many as six wings. In Western Christian art of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, they are mostly depicted as heads with multiple wings. See Richard Ettinghausen, *Arab Painting*, New York 1977, pp. 178-9, and James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*, New York 1979, pp. 16-17.



been invited by numerous institutions in Western Europe and North America as an artist-in-residence and guest lecturer. In 2000, while international audiences were viewing her most recent work at London's Tate Modern, Hatoum was back in Beirut participating in the Ayloul Cultural Festival. There, she presented an illustrated lecture on her work spanning two decades. This was the first time Hatoum's art was seen in her city of birth.<sup>24</sup>

Hatoum's daring, diverse, dramatic and innovative art has included live performances, videos, sculptures and time-based installations. In each of her works, she has questioned the dichotomies of private/public and personal/political and in so doing has redefined the distance between artist and art object, art object and audience, her own body and that of the spectator.

While Hatoum is opposed to fixing an identity to her art that might limit its reading in terms of gender or nationality, her work derives its lucidity and power from personal experience and the specificity of time and place. Many of her works are charged with spatial ambivalence and tactile evocations, wherein the personal and the political are entwined and her body becomes the subject of artistic inquiry. In this respect, her art constitutes a visual homage to Arab women's literary expression, which traditionally has been mediated or spoken through the body.<sup>25</sup>

Seraphim was never aware of al-Sa'di's work, just as Hatoum's art reveals no traces of Seraphim's world. Yet the work of these pioneers reflects a process whereby at different historical moments each developed her own strategies of resistance to mainstream conventions. While al-Sa'di gave a human face to her homeland's memory, Seraphim recovered that memory through tracing features of her own face and body. Similarly, in her work, Hatoum's body bears witness to what Edward Said termed 'a defiant memory' through which she articulates a 'logic of irreconcilables'.<sup>26</sup>

In his reading of Hatoum's work, Said expounds:

In the age of migrants, curfews, identity cards, refugees, exiles, massacres, camps and fleeing civilians, ... [Hatoum's works of art] are the uncooptable mundane instruments of a defiant memory facing itself and its pursuing or oppressing others implacably, marked forever by changes ... yet unwilling to let go of the past that [her works] carry along with them like some silent catastrophe that goes on and on without fuss or rhetorical bluster.<sup>27</sup>

In order to illustrate how Hatoum's 'logic of irreconcilables' has evolved out of a 'defiant memory' into an art form that transcends the limitations of time and place, the following brief description of selected works created during the first twelve years of her career shows how Hatoum's art redefines the world through her

24. For more reading on Mona Hatoum's work, see *Mona Hatoum*, Paris 1994, Michael Archer (et al.), *Mona Hatoum (Contemporary Artist)*, London 1997, *Mona Hatoum*, Chicago 1997, *Mona Hatoum*, Turin 1999, *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land*, London 2000.

25. For an elaborate analysis of how the Arab woman's access to literary expression has, from the ninth to the twentieth century, been traditionally mediated or spoken through the body, see Fadwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing*, Princeton 1991.

26. Edward W. Said, 'The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum's Logic of Irreconcilables', in *Mona Hatoum* London 2000, pp. 7-17.

27. *Ibid.*

are sentenced but also those who have eyes to see, when they experience – for a flashing second – what it feels like to be sentenced to life in prison.



In the tradition of Arab women writers whose voices reverberate throughout the history of Arabic literature, Arab women artists have been instrumental in shaping the history of contemporary Arab art. Unlike their peers in Western cultures whose creative output has been denigrated by the art establishment, Arab women artists have received recognition within their cultural environment and a number have stood at the forefront of innovation and change thanks to their subversive artistic language.<sup>29</sup>

The works of all four artists discussed challenged the mainstream artistic currents of their times. The portraits that Zulfa al-Sa'di hung in the halls of the Supreme Muslim Council in Jerusalem ignored inherited conventions and popular beliefs associated with image-making as much as Sophie Halaby ignored the nationalist iconography of her contemporaries. Similarly, Juliana Seraphim's erotic imagery defied the self-censorship prevalent within her cultural milieu as Mona Hatoum chose a visual language that broke with the pictorial tradition evolved over centuries in her country of residence.

While these four artists, separated by time and place, embraced expressive forms that stemmed from different strategies of resistance in which the body was a vehicle of self-expression, all sought to synthesize historical moments with an aesthetic vocabulary that transcended dominant rhetoric. Al-Sa'di's iconic portraiture, Halaby's incarnated landscape, Seraphim's ethereal realms and Hatoum's tactile metaphors and constructs of spatial ambivalence all function as mirrors: by reflecting themselves, these artists have elucidated their political memory and reality. Generally speaking, their art also resonates with the experience of most Palestinian women who find they share more with their own countrymen than with women elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

Aesthetic sensibilities, political priorities and strategies of resistance may continue to change in accordance with the shifting frontiers of the Palestinian woman artist's reality. Memory, however, will continue to inform her vision. The challenge faced by the Palestinian woman artist living and creating in her country of birth on either side of the 'Green Line' is how to critically redefine her self – both aesthetically and politically – having been doubly defined as an Other. Cut off from the heritage of her predecessors, the immediate question confronting the Palestinian woman artist is whether her art can inspire her Israeli and Palestinian audiences alike, men *and* women, to break out of the larger prisons in which they have been raised.

29. For a critical analysis of the history of discrimination against women in the arts in Western culture, see Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, New York 1981, and Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, New York 1988, and her *Representing Women*, London and New York 1999.

30. For a better understanding of the obstacles hindering the long-desired alliance of women across race or national boundaries, see bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman?*, Boston, MA, 1981, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', *Boundary 2*, 12, spring-fall 1994.