

The World, the Self, and the Body:

Pioneering Women in Palestinian Art

Kamal Boullata

“Do I have a right to womanliness? Can I achieve an artistic endeavor and can they coincide?”

Eva Hesse (1936-1970)

Personal Journal, Quoted in the exhibit catalog

Eva Hesse: A Retrospective (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1992).

“One paints only oneself.”

Etel 'Adnan

Of Cities and Women (Sausalito: The Post-Apollo Press, 1993).

On July 19, 1972 a baby girl was born in Neve Tirzah, the women's section of Ramleh prison. Nadia was the name given to the baby by her mother, Zakiyya Shammout, who was serving a life sentence for acts of resistance against the Israeli occupation. When I first learned of Nadia's birth, I was in Washington, DC putting the final touches on what was to be the first English language anthology of modern poetry by Arab women. As the birth in captivity embodied the profound faith and anguish articulated by the women whom I had translated, I dedicated the anthology to the newborn Nadia Shammout.¹

The artists participating in the current exhibit belong to the same generation as the baby girl who first saw light in an Israeli jail. Born under the same sky on both sides of the “Green Line,” these Palestinian women speak to us through their “self portraits.” In an attempt to recapture images from their own worlds, each of these artists charts her way out of the larger prison in which she was conceived.

Though the exhibit's title “Self Portrait” is, like other pictorial terms, a recent import into Arabic, it is worth

remembering that self-revelation and self-assertion have always been exercised by Arab women through poetry—the most personal form of expression in their cultural heritage. By examining the literary record from the 6th Century CE onward, one invariably finds that the history of Arabic poetry is marked with the works of women who never confined themselves to one poetic genre or another. Arab women expressed their inner selves through writing that ranged from the elegy to the meditative ballad, the heroic ode to the mystical canticle, and the love song to the erotic poem.²

Since the 19th Century, when the visual arts gained a footing in Arab culture, in which the oral arts had predominated for centuries, increasing numbers of women have found a means of self-expression in the studio arts.³ In Syria and Palestine, where distinctive styles of the Byzantine icon are traceable to the late 17th Century, there is no evidence of women's contribution to the elaboration of this native pictorial tradition of the Arab Orthodox Church. However, since the last masters of what was regionally recognized as the Jerusalem school of icon painting were also the forerunners of contemporary Palestinian art, some female students, along with male apprentices, were known to have received their earliest painting lessons from these local artists. Thus, paintings by a new generation of women and men working around the turn of the 20th Century reflect the first attempts at a secular, national pictorial language. Today, no study of Palestinian art is complete without acknowledging women's major contribution to this century-old legacy.⁴

The present group exhibit offers us the opportunity to briefly illuminate the significant contribution made by three Palestinian women artists of previous generations, thus placing this exhibit in a wider

historical perspective. In this context, it should be remembered that the very first exhibit of work by a Palestinian artist was of paintings by a woman. Thanks to the Supreme Muslim Council in Jerusalem that first displayed her work in its gallery, the woman's paintings were officially nominated for exhibit in the Palestine Pavilion at the First National Arab Fair held at the Council's premises on Mamilla Street during the summer of 1933. The name of the artist was Zulfa al-Sa'di.

Zulfa al-Sa'di (1905-1988)

Born in Jerusalem to an illustrious family, al-Sa'di's last name had for centuries been the name of an entire neighborhood in the Old City (Harat al-Sa'diyya) as well as a cemetery (Turbet al-Sa'diyya) located at the Bab al-Silsileh entrance leading to the Noble Sanctuary. She apprenticed with Nicola Sayigh (d.1930), one of the last master iconographers of the Jerusalem School and a pioneer of studio painting. With the resonance of her family name probably helping to bring attention to her talents, al-Sa'di's exhibit proved to be a watershed. Her work impressed the country's major national figures, all of whom attended the opening, as their signatures in the guest book attest. Her exhibit was also enthusiastically received by an admiring audience of visitors from the numerous Arab countries that participated in the Fair. Such wide appreciation for her talents marked an unprecedented public endorsement of an art form heretofore unrecognized as a means of personal expression. The twenty eight year-old unmarried woman displayed her embroideries beside her paintings, as the guest book indicates, but the highest praises were bestowed upon her painterly skills which, as one guest noted, made the "images speak."⁵

The dozen or so paintings that survive from the exhibit are all medium-sized oils on canvas, befitting either a private or public interior. Realistically rendered, with an academic figurative style, her subject matter included a couple of landscapes, a still life with cactus (a favorite theme of her mentor, Sayigh), and a distinct series of recognizable portraits endowed with iconic characteristics.⁶ At first glance, her subject matter did

not differ much from that of her male contemporaries. At a second glance, however, one notices a woman's different emphases in portraying the popular themes of the period. The uniqueness of al-Sa'di's perspective becomes clear upon examining how these popular themes developed under the influence of the leading Jerusalem painter and iconographer, Nicola Sayigh.

Like the Orthodox Russian painters with whom he worked closely on a number of local church projects, Sayigh began painting portraits of native people without abandoning his illustrations of religious themes.⁷ His fellow iconographers and local image-makers followed suit by trying their hands at portraiture before venturing into landscapes and other subjects. A case in point is Sayigh's painting of a narrative scene of General Allenby's 1917 entry into Jerusalem announcing the end of Ottoman rule, and the consequent public anticipation of national independence. Influenced by Sayigh, a number of younger talents proceeded to portray—from their imaginations—other historical instances in which Jerusalem is delivered. The Jerusalem native **Daoud Zalatimo** (b.1906) repeatedly painted an imagined rendering of the bloodless entry of Caliph 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab to Jerusalem in 637 CE and his amiable encounter with Sophronius, the Arab Byzantine patriarch who personally guided him through the city. Zalatimo's fellow Jerusalemite, **Mubarak Sa'd** (1880-1964), depicted Jerusalem's Christian and Muslim Arabs celebrating the liberation of their city from the Crusaders in 1187 CE, whereupon Saladin ordered all streets and prayer houses washed with rose water.⁸

This narrative trend illustrates how, over a few years, the purpose of painting changed with the political climate. In one painting, Sayigh portrayed the initial joy felt by the Palestinians who rushed to Jaffa Gate to welcome General Allenby. Sayigh reproduced the jubilant celebration of his compatriots who naively thought that the General's arrival signaled the fulfillment of the promise of independence given by the British High Commissioner in Egypt, Sir Henry McMahon, to Sharif Hussein, leader of the Arab revolt against the Ottomans. However, the imagined historical renditions painted by Sayigh's followers were created at a time when the British presence was already understood as a pretext

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for the implementation of the Balfour Declaration's intent to establish a "Jewish National Home" in Palestine. Thus, narrative painting became the visual counterpart of the popular nationalist poetry of the period.⁹ On one level, through the artists' focus on Jerusalem, the paintings served as an allegorical means for asserting the Arab national identity of the country. On another, the paintings sought to expose, through their juxtaposition, the true agenda of Allenby's arrival.

Zulfa al-Sa'di had a different artistic strategy for relaying her political message. By opting to paint a chosen set of recognizable portraits, she made a choice, as it were, to focus on the tangibility of a close-up rather than the generality of a scene in which individual traits are dissolved. Al-Sa'di's portraits ranged from legendary heroes painted from her imagination to popular political and cultural figures reproduced from studio photographs. Thus, with the solemn look of the holy figures depicted in her teacher's icons, a portrait of **Saladin** in his armor was hung next to portraits of **Sharif Hussein**—leader of the Arab revolt, and another of his son, **Faisal**, whose popularity was widespread among Palestinians. The exhibit also included a portrait of '**Umar al-Mukhtar**, who two years prior had been executed by the Fascists for leading a 20 year revolt against Italian colonial rule in Libya. Along with portraits of legendary and heroic figures, al-Sa'di paid tribute to nationalist poetry by including a portrait of **Ahmad Shawqi**, known as "the prince of poets." Al-Sa'di also included two portraits of turbaned men, one of them the Islamic reformist thinker **Jamal al-Din al-Afghani** and another of an unidentified man whose features resemble those of the progressive Palestinian educator Sheikh Muhammad Suleiman al-Saleh, founder of the Rawdah School for Girls in Jerusalem.

The sight of these distinct faces hanging side by side must have amounted to an impressive and unusual experience for many of the viewers. The choice of combining the image of a legendary hero with that of a contemporary nationalist leader, alongside a cultural figure—and each from a different Arab country—conveyed the artist's political message. By so doing, al-Sa'di seemed to suggest that her portrait series represented continuity between past and present,

history and culture. While the homelands of the men portrayed may be fragmented and subjected to colonial rule, national solidarity and resistance to foreign domination was what bound these countries into a single body for which Palestine—whose Jerusalem landscapes were displayed in the exhibit—was the heart. More importantly, by avoiding the grand historical events popularized by her male contemporaries, al-Sa'di suggested, through her choice of portraits, that history and culture are shaped by individual human beings and not faceless masses. Her visual statement echoed the voice of a number of Palestinian women of the period.¹⁰

At a time when photography was believed to be the ultimate representation of reality, an imagined portrait appeared more believable when placed beside a painted reproduction of an officially publicized photograph. Thus, ancient and modern history assumed a human face. The allusion to photography was accentuated by al-Sa'di who enframed several of her imagined and reproduced portraits with an oval, the *dernier cri* of photography in her day. Furthermore, like the Byzantine icons that carried religious notations along with the names of the holy figures depicted, al-Sa'di's portraits often included the names of the portrayed or a verse of popular poetry in Arabic calligraphic script. With her portraits, each of which impressed its own mythical presence, the student of the leading Jerusalem iconographer made a pioneering contribution to Palestinian art by creating a set of secular national icons.

The al-Sa'di canvases exhibited in the halls of the Supreme Muslim Council in 1933 are among the few paintings to survive from the period. They endured because al-Sa'di was able to dismount and roll the works into a tube which she carried with her when she fled the Jewish assault on the Arab residential quarters of her native city in the spring of 1948. As for the icons and paintings left hanging in the homes of affluent Palestinian urbanites, along with art collections accumulated over a half a century by a handful of Palestinian collectors, little was salvaged. The bulk of it was lost in the widespread looting carried out by members of the Jewish forces who were authorized to seize Arab homes and expel their inhabitants.¹¹

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With her paintings in hand, Zulfa al-Sa'di joined the stream of Palestinian refugees headed for the Syrian border. In Damascus, where she took up residence, she dedicated the remainder of her life to educating the children of Palestinian refugees by teaching art classes in primary schools set up by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Later, she headed the Lydda School in one of the refugee camps. She died in Damascus without seeing her home again. There are no indications that al-Sa'di ever returned to painting.

Juliana Seraphim (b.1934)

Juliana Seraphim belongs to the first generation of visual artists that emerged from the Palestinian refugee population to assume a leading role among women artists in the Arab world. Born in Jaffa, Seraphim was fourteen years old when her native city fell under attack. Seraphim and her family fled their coastal hometown by fishing boat to Sidon. There, they waited to return home, once the violence subsided. Four years later, when it became clear that return was barred by the Israelis, the Seraphim family moved to Beirut where they started a new life. In Beirut, Seraphim, the eldest daughter and a recent graduate of a Sidon secondary school, found work as a secretary at the UNRWA headquarters (one of the few jobs open to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon).

When Seraphim arrived in Beirut in 1952, the city's rapid transformation into a regional economic center and vital metropolis had just begun. During the politically turbulent two decades that followed, Beirut's prosperity and openness were unrivaled in the Middle East, making it a cultural crucible and a haven for Arab poets, writers, and artists. Beirut's publications and literary periodicals, which reached the entire Arab world, spurred a dynamic, innovative movement in Arab writing. Arabic translations of provocative works such as Simone de Beauvoire's *The Second Sex* and Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* appeared in Beirut immediately after their publication in Paris. Similarly, during the 1950's and 1960's, exhibits of contemporary art were no longer confined to those mounted once a year by the Sursock Museum. Commercial and private

galleries sprung up around the capital opening their doors year-round to display the freshest work that artists' studios had to offer. Women poets, novelists, literary critics, and visual artists were in the vanguard shaping Beirut's cultural scene.¹²

Early on, Seraphim was lured by the visual arts, but neither her work schedule, nor the rigid, traditional program offered at the Lebanese Fine Arts Academy, fit her creative temperament.¹³ After work, she began taking lessons with the Lebanese painter Jean Khalifeh (1923-1978) and found herself dedicating more and more time to painting. Her first pieces were introduced to the public in the 1950's through exhibits at Khalifeh's studio. Later, her work was displayed at La Licorne Gallery and other Beirut showrooms. In time, her exceptional talent won her protracted sojourns in Florence in 1958, Madrid in 1960, and Paris in 1965. In each of these cities, Seraphim pursued independent study and mounted solo exhibitions. After receiving recognition from Beirut's cultural circles, Seraphim was invited to participate in the Sursock Museum's 1961 annual exhibit. Eventually, she was able to live from her painting as she went on to represent Lebanon in international exhibits, including the biennials of Alexandria in 1962, Paris in 1963, and Sao Paolo in 1965.

Seraphim's groundbreaking visual language expressed a deeply personal form of art teeming with sinuous fantasy. She was considered a renegade and outsider by other Palestinian artists of her generation who, emerging from the refugee camps, were forging a didactic form of figurative art that highlighted the centrality of the Palestinian national struggle. Seraphim's originality and creative contribution may best be appreciated in the context of the mainstream art promoted by her Palestinian compatriots in Beirut.

Foremost among Palestinian refugee artists who employed their image-making skills to publicize the Palestinian national cause was **Isma'il Shammout** (b.1930), a favorite pupil of Daoud Zalatimo in the 1940's.¹⁴ Shammout's leading artistic role was shaped not only by the training he received, and the talent he possessed, but also by the political scene into which he made his entry. In 1954, the twenty four year-old

Lydda-born painter from a Gaza refugee camp opened his first Cairo exhibit with a personal inauguration by Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasser. The opening was also attended by Palestinian political figures such as Haj Amin al-Husseini and Yasser Arafat who, at the time, headed the Union of Palestinian Students.¹⁵ Following this highly publicized event, Shammout's art became a formative influence on countless young Palestinian refugee artists. During the two decades that saw the Palestinian cause rise to the top of the region's political agenda, a new, popular pictorial language emerged from the camps. Thanks to Shammout's 1965 appointment as founder of the PLO's Art Education Department in Beirut, his work came to represent an exemplary form of visual expression patronized by political leaders, emulated by dilettantes, and embraced by the masses. Viewed by audiences who knew little of the history of painting in Palestine before 1948, Shammout's work was considered the ultimate "original" Palestinian art.

Having spent over a decade of his career working as a commercial artist, Shammout acquired an inestimable asset: a figurative language with which to reach "the people."¹⁶ His image-making talent was didactically employed to chronicle the unfolding of the Palestinian saga and to rally support for the national struggle. Recalling Zalatimo's use of allegory, Shammout's visual repertoire often borrowed from socialist-realist models which he adorned with Palestinian artifacts and infused with the connotations of common verbal allegories. By the mid 1960's, after Mahmoud Darwish's poem "Lover from Palestine" popularized the metaphor of the female body as the ancestral land, Shammout gave this metaphor pictorial form, as did an entire generation of male image-makers who succeeded him.¹⁷

While Shammout's didactic art, like that of his followers, sought to reach the masses, Seraphim's art was an outlet and medium for self-discovery and revelation. Believing that the inner self is the fountainhead of all images, and that freedom is the ultimate goal of expression, she once said, "I do not differentiate between art and life. Through art I find love and through love I find my freedom."¹⁸ In this respect, Seraphim's quest in art was not unlike that of her

contemporaries, the Palestinian women poets Fadwa Tuqan (b.1917) and Salma al-Khadra al-Jayyusi (b.1928). Their self-revelatory poetry of the same period emanated from a fervid exploration of their inner worlds. Tuqan and al-Jayyusi, working at the forefront of the new movement in Arabic writing, made their finest contributions through love poems.¹⁹

Driven by her creative instincts, Seraphim delved into the darker corners of her inner world to recover a visual language from dormant memory. 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, the liquefied realm she created was satiated with erotic connotations. While the personal, surreal language she invented may have been defended by Lebanese art critics on the basis of arguments advanced by the first generation of European surrealists, her final products were a distant departure from such work. In fact, Seraphim's work had more in common with that of contemporary American women artists who, like her, worked in mid-Century after being inspired by surrealism. Though Seraphim was unaware of the American women's work, as the latter had yet to receive their due recognition.²⁰

Seraphim's sensuous images and erotic connotations were perhaps the most salient features of her fantastic imagery. Thus, it is not surprising that when the editor of a Beirut literary periodical published Laila Ba'albaki's erotic short story "A Vessel of Tenderness to the Moon," he chose Seraphim to illustrate the Lebanese novelist's work. Once published in book form (the book appearing without Seraphim's drawings), Ba'albaki was faced with a highly publicized trial for "indecency," which she eventually won.²¹

The ethereal quality of Seraphim's sinuous fantasies challenged all sense of gravity as much as her erotically suggestive imagery defied social taboos and conventions. With sweeping brush strokes and hairline drawings she

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gave shape to agile bodies and winged beings floating amid pools of imaginary orchards. She traced the curves of sculpted buds and wild petals that swirl and undulate among glistening, translucent shapes evoking the female form, along with crystal horses that surge through clouds from a liquefied realm. In her improvisational compositional process, spontaneous brush marks turn a wave into an erroneous leaf and the plumage of imaginative birds fuses with waves and seashells dissolving wings and water into each other within an aureole of translucent colors. The imagined dream-worlds, connoting features of her own body, seem to retrace objects and sites remembered from a joyous childhood spent between seashore and orange grove.

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Years later, when asked about the source for her fantastic imagery, Seraphim recalled how as a child she used to enjoy spending weekends in Jerusalem with her grandfather, whose home had once served as a secluded convent. Seraphim mentioned how the ancient arches, vaults, and domed ceilings of her grandfather's house bore traces of colorful frescoes that evoked the apparition of supernatural beings. These frescoes filled the young Seraphim with awe and mystery, leaving their mark on her for the rest of her life.²² Thus, in her work we see—as in a dream—how impressions from a Jerusalem ceiling dissolve into treasured 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. 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.²³ While the "bride" often denotes "Jaffa" in Palestinian vernacular, in Seraphim's paintings the bride's features invariably reflect her own.

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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 the 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 further her education at 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, Sidney, and Hong Kong (among other cities), has been invited by numerous institutions in Western Europe and North America as an artist-in-residence and guest lecturer. Last autumn, while international audiences engaged with her 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.²⁴

Hatoum's daring, diverse, dramatic, and innovative art has included live performances, videos, sculptures, and time-based installations. In each of her works, Hatoum 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 opposed to fixing an identity to her art that might limit its reading in terms of gender or nationality, Hatoum's work does derive 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.²⁵

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."²⁶

In his reading of Hatoum's recent 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."²⁷

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, a brief description of selected works created over a twelve-year period follows. It is my hope that the reader will see how Hatoum's art redefines the world through her body by reaching that of her spectator and, in the process, creating a metaphoric language that speaks at once of exile and identification, oppression and resistance, captivity and freedom.

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Under Siege, one of Hatoum's earliest performances, was mounted in London six days before Israel launched its 1982 military invasion of Lebanon. Within less than a month from the date of her performance, Hatoum's audience watched on television how her city of birth was beleaguered and besieged. After cutting off the supply of electricity and water from Beirut's population, the Israeli army, air force, and navy proceeded to bombard the city incessantly. Resistance on the part of a handful of Palestinian and Lebanese fighters staved off Israel's massive onslaught for ten weeks.²⁸

In the performance, Hatoum's naked body—covered with clay and imprisoned within a transparent cubicle—struggled to stand up, only to slip and fall repeatedly in the mud. Under Siege lasted for seven consecutive hours during which gallery-goers could watch through the cubicle's transparent walls how Hatoum's body

convulsed, spattering the inner walls with mud as she made relentless attempts to hold herself up. The metaphor, personified by the image of Hatoum's obstinate physical endurance, was intensified by the aural contrast between her restless throes and thumps and a looped recording of singing muffled by casual conversation in various languages.

The aftermath of Israel's invasion of Lebanon triggered another work by Hatoum. During the year following the September 1982 massacre of Palestinians in Beirut's Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps perpetrated under Israeli auspices, Hatoum staged a performance in Ottawa titled **The Negotiating Table**. Just as Under Siege preceded the siege of Beirut, The Negotiating Table preceded a decade of on-going regional political talks. While her earlier performance involved the ceaseless vertical commotion of her body within a restricted space, The Negotiating Table was based on the absolute horizontal stillness of her body laid out on a table flanked by three empty chairs. The dramatic effect of the scene was accentuated by total darkness save for a single spotlight hung directly above the table upon which Hatoum's body lay motionless for three consecutive hours. The viewer was lured to come closer to examine what looked like a corpse under an interrogation lamp. Tied with rope and wrapped from head to toe in bandages drenched with blood, Hatoum's body was seen through a plastic bag. The bloodstained bandages concealed her face as sanguineous entrails bulged from her abdomen. Coming from the darkness, the viewer could hear looped excerpts of news coverage of the Lebanon war interrupted by declarations of peace voiced by Western heads of state.

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Her 1988 video **Measures of Distance**, originally shot a year before the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, assumed its final form seven years later. In it we see a fifteen-minute close-up of Hatoum's mother showering. The granulated image of her body is visible through handwritten lines excerpted from letters written by the mother to her daughter. A casual chat between the two is heard through the sound of fine drizzle, interrupted by the artist's voice-over translating segments of her mother's words for an English-speaking audience. Their correspondence, which includes reports on the day-to-

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day reality of civil war, also features conversation between mother and daughter about sexuality and the family's past. At one point, the mother apologetically explains to Mona that her bad temper as Mona was growing up was attributable to her anguish at having been uprooted from Haifa, her family, and her friends. While the superimposed Arabic script acts as a shield protecting the mother's naked body, it also resembles the barbed wire that marks the separation between mother and daughter, and mother and homeland. The warmth of the image, however, and their intimate, loving interchange, bridges the distance to reveal Hatoum's deep identification with her mother's body and exile.

Having identified her own exile through her mother's body, Hatoum was ready to explore how her body as a site of exile could provoke identification in the spectator. Thus, on the occasion of her 1994 solo exhibit at the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris, Hatoum mounted an installation titled **Corps étranger** (Strange Body). The work consists of a cylindrical cell more than three meters high which, upon entering through a narrow opening, is found to contain non-stop audio and video of the inside of Hatoum's body. Gathered through a clinical probe, the images reveal how the medical video lens plunges through the body's crevices penetrating its tunnels and cavities, to the point of claustrophobic closeness, inverting the artist's body for the spectator's gaze. The images are projected in the center of the round floor. The restrictive space obliges the spectator to walk around or over the moving images. Concealed speakers placed at ear-level amplify the slushy sounds of inaccessible organs at work, punctuated by the beating of Hatoum's heart. At a certain point, the sounds and images contained in the cell annul any distance between Hatoum's body, and that of the walled-in spectator.

This sense of simultaneous estrangement from, and identification with, the artist's body in which Hatoum's "logic of irreconcilables" was manifest, could only be experienced by the spectator enclosed within the cell. The restrictive space of the cylindrical cell in which her spectator was made to stand, like the transparent cubicle or the plastic bag that contained her own body, was a means for Hatoum to speak—through her

body—about resistance, protest, identification, estrangement, and exile.

In two succeeding works, Hatoum explored the significance of the body's confinement by implicating the spectator's body in her work. In both her 1989 *The Light at the End*, and her 1992 *Light Sentence*, the spectator's tactile senses and spatial ambivalence blurred the difference between freedom and captivity, as the observer of the objects of confinement turned into the object of confinement itself.

The Light at the End is an installation composed of a vertical, gate-like structure wedged between two narrowing walls that converge at a dead end. On all three sides surrounding the gate, the massive brick walls are painted blood red. The single light source illuminating the dead end streams down from a spotlight above a rectangular frame bracing six vertical heating-unit bars emitting an orange glow. In the darkness of the gallery, the dramatically illuminated site lures the spectator to move toward the suspended gate. As the gate, bolted on both sides, is impossible to open, the wide space between the bars seduces the spectator to consider slipping through them to the area beyond the gate like reaching a happy ending, as the work's title suggests. But the closer the spectator moves toward the site, the more s/he feels the fierce heat emitted by the gate's lit bars, stinging the spectator's eyes and skin, and turning the free observer into a prisoner within the gallery space.

Light Sentence is another installation in which the spectator senses imprisonment. The installation is composed of two rows of empty cubicle lockers made of silver-colored wire grids vertically stacked far above the spectator's head. The parallel rows are met at one end by a third stack of empty lockers forming a wire grid corridor with a dead end. On both sides of the corridor many of the locker doors hang open. The single source of light in the gallery comes from a bare bulb suspended on a cord hanging in the middle of the corridor. The blinding light coming through the grids casts spectral shadows that spread to the surrounding walls. The bulb, which is motorized, moves slowly down to the floor. There, it wobbles a little before beginning its gradual ascent. Shadows cast by the empty lockers

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loom with the slow movement of the light, multiplying the web of grids that shift uneasily on the surrounding walls. In the process, the disoriented spectator's shadow is engulfed within the grilled enclosure of a larger cage.

While the title *Light Sentence*, which sounds like “life sentence,” suggests a punishment less severe, the word “light,” like its use in *The Light at the End*, refers to the very energy that makes vision possible. Thus, it is through our sense of seeing that we grasp how Hatoum's work implies that not only those who are incarcerated 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.

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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.²⁹

The portraits that 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 Seraphim's erotic imagery defied the inhibitions prevalent within her cultural milieu. Moreover, the works of both artists challenged the mainstream artistic currents of their compatriots. Similarly, Hatoum chose a visual language that broke with the pictorial tradition evolved over centuries in her country of residence.

While these three artists, separated by time and place, embraced expressive forms that stemmed from different strategies of resistance, all sought to synthesize historical moments with an aesthetic vocabulary that transcended dominant rhetoric. Al-Sa'di's iconic portraiture, 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.³⁰

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 re-define 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.

Notes

- 1 *Women of the Fertile Crescent: An Anthology of Modern Poetry by Arab Women* (Washington, DC, Three Continents Press, 1978 / Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992) included poetry by André Chedid (Egypt); Nazik al-Mala'ika (Iraq); Etel Adnan, Therese 'Awwad, and Nadia Tuéni (Lebanon); Hanan Mikha'il, Fadwa Tuqan, and Salma K. al-Jayyusi (Palestine); Fawziyyah Abu Khalid (Saudi Arabia); 'Aisha Arna'ut, Samar 'Attar and Saniyyeh Saleh (Syria). Thanks to the US women's movement of the early 1970's that prompted this endeavor. In Arabic, see also my text, "Manshur Jinsiyasi" (Sex-Pol Manifesto), *Mawaqif* (no. 28, summer issue, 1974, pp. 46-59).
- 2 Literary critic Terri De Young writes, "Arabic literature constitutes an extraordinarily rich venue for women's writing, perhaps one of the richest to be found in any literary tradition." From the 6th Century CE until the 13th Century CE, she notes, "a record of women's compositions in Arabic... indicates not only that women had access to a voice, but to a learned voice which guaranteed them a certain level of cultural respect that not many men were able to command." See DeYoung's "Love, Death and the Ghost of al-Khansa" in K. 'Abdel-Malek (ed.) *Tradition, Modernity, and Postmodernity in Arabic Literature* (Leiden, Brill, 2000, pp. 45-75). For a general historical account of women's literary contributions, see Emilie Nasrallah, *Nisa' Ra'idat* (Pioneering Women) (Beirut, Mu'assasat Nawfal, 1986). For a bibliography of Lebanese women writers from 1850 to 1950, see Naziq Saba Yard and Nuha Bayyumi, *al-Katibaat al-Lubnaniyyat* (Lebanese Women Writers) (London, Dar al-Saqi, 2000). For a more comprehensive range of studies on "Writing and the Arab Woman," see the special issue titled "al-Mar'a wa al-Kitaba" (Women and Writing) in *Bahithat* (Vol. 5, 1995) published by the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers.
- 3 For general works on Arab women artists see, Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon* (Beirut, Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Beirut University College, 1987), Nazli Madkour, *Women and Art in Egypt* (Cairo, State Information Service Press, 1993), Salwa Mikdadi Nashashibi, *Forces of Change: Artists of the Arab World* (Washington, DC, The National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1994), and F. Lloyd (ed.) *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present* (London, Women's Art Library, 1999).
- 4 For a more detailed account of Palestinian painters at the turn of the 20th Century and how the last masters of the Jerusalem School of icon painting came to be the first pioneers of contemporary Palestinian art, see Chapter I: "Milad al-Lugha al-Mahaliyya fi al-Taswir," (The Birth of a Local Pictorial Language) in my book, *Istihdar al-Makan: Dirasat fi al-Fan al-Tashkili al-Filastini al-Mu'asir* (The Recovery of Place: A Study of Palestinian Contemporary Painting) (Tunis, ALECSO, 2000, pp. 45-84). This study includes an in-depth exploration of works by over a dozen Palestinian women artists from the turn of the 20th Century through the late 1990's and contains over 40 color illustrations of works by women artists.
- 5 In October-November 1998 A. H. Shoman Foundation's Darat al-Funun in Amman hosted a public exhibit including a number of Zulfa al-Sa'di's paintings from her 1933 Jerusalem exhibition together with pages from the exhibit's guest book. Thanks to them I was able to read the handwritten comments and examine the paintings which, unfortunately, were in a decaying state.
- 6 For further information on the theme of the cactus in the history of Palestinian painting, see my study, "The Artist's Eyes and the Cactus Tree" in a forthcoming commemorative book on 'Asim Abu Shaqra edited by Nira Itzhaki and published by the Chelouche Gallery in Tel Aviv. A shorter version of this essay appeared in *al-Carmel* (no. 60, Summer, 1999, pp. 260-263).
- 7 Russian iconographers in Jerusalem during the late 19th Century who also painted contemporary subject matter include Aleksander Ivanov, Vassily Vereshchagin, and Leonid Pasternak—father of Boris Pasternak, the author of *Dr. Zhivago*. For further reading on Russian painters who also painted icons see, Oleg Tarassov, "Russian Icons and the Avant-Garde: Tradition and Change" in Bettina-Martine Wolter (exhibit curator), *The Art of Holy Russia: Icons from Moscow, 1400-1660* (London, Royal Academy of Arts, 1998, pp. 93-99).
- 8 Color illustrations of these paintings and others of the period appear in *Istihdar al-Makan*, pp. 22-42.
- 9 The most popular nationalist poets of the British Mandate period were Ibrahim Tuqan (1905-1941), 'Abd al-Rahim Mahmoud (1913-1948) and 'Abd al-Karim al-Karmi (1907-1988).
- 10 See for example the period's journalistic writings of Asma Touba (1905-1983) published in *Kul Shai'* and her book *al-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya fi Filastin* (Arab Women in Palestine) (Acre, 1948). In English, see Matiel Mughannam, *The Arab Woman and the Palestine Problem* (London, H. Joseph, 1937). Matiel Mughannam was a leading woman organizer who during the 1930's initiated the urban women's protests against British colonial policies throughout Palestine. For further reading see also the text of speeches delivered by Arab women on the Palestinian national struggle in their 15-18 October, 1938 conference in Cairo in *al-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya wa Qadiyyat Filastin: al-Mu'tamar al-Nisa'i al-Sharqi al-Mun'aqid bi Dar Jam'iyyat al-Ittihad*

- al-Nisa'i al-Misri* (Cairo, al-Matba'a al-'Asriyya bi Misr, 1939).
- 11 "Looting by individuals was widespread, particularly in the cities, though less so in villages and rural areas: the home of the average *fellah* held out fewer temptations than the wealthy quarters of big cities... the looting constituted an additional covert motive... since it forged groups which had a material interest, either beforehand or *post factum*, in the expulsion of the Arab population." Ephraim Kleiman, "Khirbet Khiz'ah and Other Unpleasant Memories" in I. Lustick (ed.), *Triumph and Catastrophe: the War of 1948, Israeli Independence and the Refugee Problem* (New York, Garland, 1994, p. 132).
- 12 Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian women living in Beirut and publishing their literary works during this period included the poets Etel Adnan, Therese 'Awwad, Nadia Tuéni, Thurayya Malhas, Salma al-Khadra al-Jayyusi, Samia Toutounji and Saniyyeh Saleh; the novelists Samira 'Azzam (1927-1967), Laila Ba'albaki, Ghada al-Samman, Laure Gharib and Muna Jabbur; and the influential literary critics Khalida al-Sa'id and 'Aida Matraji Idris. Women artists living in Beirut and showing their work during the same period include the Lebanese: Marie Haddad (1895-1973), Salwa Rawda Shuqair (b. 1916), Yvette Ashkar (b. 1928), Huguette Khouri Caland (1931), Helen Khal (b. 1932), Nadia Saiqali (b. 1936), and the Palestinians: Jumana al-Husseini (b. 1932), Tammam al-Akhal (b. 1935), Maliha Afnan (b. 1939), and Leila Shawwa (b. 1940). Lebanese women were also instrumental in the promotion of the visual arts and the propagation of an alternative culture. Beirut's most influential art gallery that set standards above all other commercial galleries in the city was Gallery One, established by Helen Khal with her husband poet Yusuf al-Khal. Later, Dar al-Fan, a gallery and a vigorous cultural center founded by a group of independent intellectuals, was headed by the feminist Janine Rubeiz (d. 1992). Thanks to her vision, the exhibition program was expertly curated. She turned the place into an enlightening cultural forum in which all momentous and controversial issues were open for debate and discussion.
- 13 Since its establishment in 1937, the Lebanese Fine Arts Academy has centered its training program around drawing and painting live models. It is interesting to note that in 1939, the Syrian Mariam Khairo was the first known Arab woman to have posed nude for Lebanese painters and their students.
- 14 This remark was made during a recorded interview with Daoud Zalatimo conducted in his Jerusalem home on November 26, 1998. From the student's perspective, see Isma'il Shammout, *al-Fan al-Tashkili fi Filastin* (Painting in Palestine) (Kuwait, 1989, p. 48-49).
- None of the women artists that are the focus of this essay receive any mention in Shammout's book.
- 15 See Shammout, p. 54.
- 16 To support himself during his four years of study at Cairo's Fine Arts Academy, Isma'il Shammout worked in a commercial art agency specializing in Egyptian film posters (1950-1954). Upon returning from two years of study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, he worked as an illustrator in the advertising department at UNRWA (1956-57). In 1958, he opened his own advertising agency in Beirut, which he operated for six years (1958-1964) until he procured his PLO employment in 1965. See Shammout, p. 50 and p. 55.
- 17 For a critique of how Darwish's verbal metaphor resurfaced in the pictorial language of Palestinian male artists a decade after the metaphor became a commonplace reference, see Vera Tamari and Penny Johnson, "Loss and Vision: Representations of Women in Palestinian Art Under Occupation" in A. Moors (ed. et al), *Discourse and Palestine: Power, Text and Context* (Amsterdam, Het Spinhuis, 1995, pp. 163-172). See also Tina Malhi Sherwell's article "Imaging Palestine as the Motherland" in this catalog.
- 18 See "al-Fannanun al-Lubnaniyyun Yatahaddathun 'An Fannihiem" (Lebanese Artists Speak about their Art) in *Hiwar* (no. 26-27, March-April, 1967, pp. 150-167).
- 19 See Fadwa Tuqan, *Wahdi ma' al-Ayyam* (Alone with the Days) (Cairo, Dar Misr lil-Tiba'a, 1955), *Wajadtuha* (I Found Her) (Beirut, Dar al-Adaab, 1957), *A'atina Hubban* (Give Us Love) (Beirut, Dar al-Adaab, 1960), and *Amam al-Bab al-Mughlaq* (Before the Closed Door) (Beirut, Dar al-Adaab, 1967). As for Salma al-Khadra al-Jayyusi's poems published in Beirut's periodicals during the 1950's, see her collection, *al-'Awdah Min al-Nab'a al-Halem* (Return from the Dreaming Fountainhead) (Beirut, Dar al-Adaab, 1960).
- 20 American women artists working after surrealism around the same period as Seraphim and whose work has been largely ignored include Leonora Carrington, Maya Deren, Helen Phillips, Alice Rahon, Kay Sage, Dorothea Tanning, Remedios Varos and others. See Amy Winter, "Surrealism Revisited" in *Art Journal* (Spring 1997). See also Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1991) and P. Rosemont (ed.) *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (Austin, Texas University Press, 1998).
- 21 See Seraphim's erotic drawings and Ba'albaki's *Safinat Hanan ila-l-Qamar* (A Vessel of Tenderness to the Moon) in *Hiwar* (no. 4, May-June 1963, pp. 22-28). It is noteworthy that every issue of this short-lived but influential literary quarterly edited by Palestinian

- poet Tawfiq Sayigh (1923-1971) and published in Beirut (1962-1967) 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 June 27, 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 September of 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 July 23, 1964 pronounced Ba'albaki innocent and ordered all confiscated copies returned to their owners.
- 22 See Helen Khal, *The Woman Artist in Lebanon*, pp. 71-78.
- 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, Skira/Rizzoli, 1977, pp. 178-179) and James Hall, *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art* (New York, Harper & Row Publishers, pp. 16-17).
- 24 For more reading on Mona Hatoum's work, see *Mona Hatoum* (Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1994), Michael Archer (et al) *Mona Hatoum (Contemporary Artist)* (London, Phaidon Press Inc., 1997), *Mona Hatoum* (Chicago, Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), *Mona Hatoum* (Turin, Castello di Rivoli, Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 1999), *Mona Hatoum: The Entire World as a Foreign Land* (London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000).
- 25 For an elaborate analysis of how the Arab woman's access to literary expression has, from the 9th Century through the 20th 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, Princeton University Press, 1991).
- 26 Edward W. Said, "The Art of Displacement: Mona Hatoum's Logic of Irreconciliations" in *Mona Hatoum* (London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 2000, pp. 7-17).
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 The exact date of Hatoum's London performance of *Under Siege* (May 31, 1982) was communicated to me in a personal letter dated March 3, 1999. For a Lebanese-Palestinian woman's account of life in Beirut during the Israeli siege, see Lina Mikdadi, *Surviving the Siege of Beirut: A Personal Account* (London, Onyx Press, 1983). See also Jean Sa'id Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (New York, Persea Books, 1990).
- 29 For a critical analysis of the history of discrimination against women in the arts in Western culture, see Rozsika Parker & Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1981) and Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York, Harper & Row, 1988).
- 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, South End Press, 1981) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in *Boundary 2* (12(3)/13(1), Spring-Fall, 1994).

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