

# Gaza refugee camps portrayed as vibrant and vulnerable in Palestinian contemporary art shown in London

[Sarah Irving](#) [The Electronic Intifada](#) [London](#) 2 January 2013



From Mohammed al-Hawajri's "Soul & Fragrance" series. (Image courtesy of Arts Canteen)

“These artists have all the right in the world to be on a platform, to have their

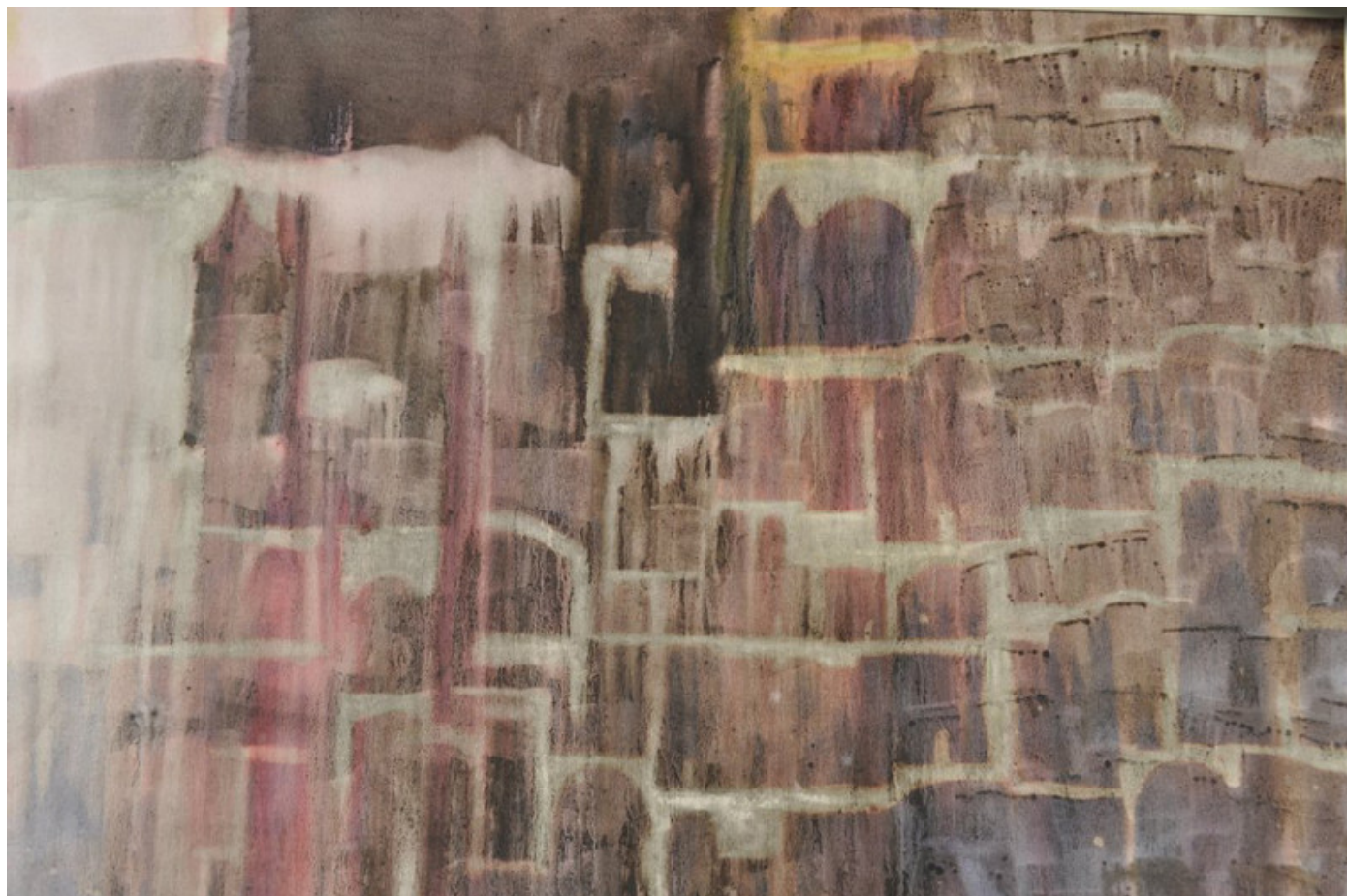
work seen with dignity, like any other artists,” said Aser El Saqqa, a curator of an exhibition of Palestinian paintings recently displayed in Britain.

Born and raised in [Gaza](#), El Saqqa is justly proud of *Despite*, as the exhibition at the Richmix arts center in east [London](#) was called. He assembled this collection, along with Nicola Gray and the organization Arts Canteen.

*Despite* has been an important exhibition for many reasons. It is probably one of the largest collections of art from Gaza ever shown, at least outside the Middle East. Nine of the sixteen artists represented at the December show are still based in Gaza.

“Yes, getting some of the works here was a challenge,” El Saqqa told The Electronic Intifada. But it was also imperative that the show included work from painters in the [West Bank](#), the [Galilee](#) and [Jerusalem](#). “All parts of Palestine,” he added.

The show has also been significant in displaying the breadth and quality of contemporary Palestinian painting. Some of the best-known Palestinian artists — [Emily Jacir](#), [Larissa Sansour](#) — mainly work in photography, installation and conceptual pieces. *Despite* illustrated the range of talent — both new, such the youthful Dina Mattar, and established, such as Hani Zurob — using more conventional media, but with a great variation of visions and methods.



Tayseer Barakat's painting of a Gaza refugee camp. (Image courtesy of Arts Canteen)

## Playing with images

Tayseer Barakat and Raed Issa tackle the subject of refugee camps. Their work draws on their experiences of life in [Jabaliya](#) and [al-Bureij](#) camps in Gaza.

But where Barakat's camp is portrayed as an ethereal, misty world in pinks and grays, beautiful at a distance but impersonal and anonymous, Issa's is composed of blocks of striking color, with clear blue skies above and welcome shade



between the houses and, in every image, always a green tree sprouting from the close-packed homes. The arrays of satellite dishes on the rooftops hint at the electronic means which many Palestinians must resort to for contact with the outside world, while the black plastic water-tanks are both vital for life and a frequent target for Israeli soldiers.

Raed Issa's "Satellites." (Image courtesy of Arts Canteen)

Gaza-born Mohammed Joha's large canvases, meanwhile, play with images and references to ask questions about identity and freedom. In "Behind the Wall," a bright blue car with a pink parachute appears to have risen up above the ominous black wall. Or is it preparing to do so? Is it trying to escape, or has it already managed? And are the puffs of white smoke beyond it the remnants of a [phosphorous](#) burst, from one of the slowly-descending bombs which the parachute might also refer to?



Mohammed Joha's "Who Am I?" (Image courtesy of Arts Canteen)

Joha's "Who Am I?" features a figure with a black hat pulled down low and the shirt collar pulled up; we assume from the clothes that it is a man, but the hands brandishing the ID card are slender and beautiful, and the darkness of the figure is juxtaposed against a background of floral patterns, like a mother's housedress or a little girl's bedroom. The painting is another point in a long history of artistic representations of the ambiguous, constraining significance of ID cards in Palestinian life, perhaps the best known example being [Mahmoud Darwish's](#) poem "Write Down ... I Am An Arab."

## Stubborn cactus

A number of the less figurative works in the exhibition use Arabic script as a motif. Majed Shala's works in vibrant oranges, red and blues feature vague human forms composed of torn-up pieces of Arabic calligraphy. The titles — “Exposed,” “Dialogue,” “Motherhood under siege” — refer to aspects of Palestinian life. Nabil Anani and Mohammed al-Hawajri's images also take calligraphy, combining it with decorative elements and classical Arabic artistic motifs to situate Palestinian art within the long traditions of the wider Arab world and culture.



From Mohammed Abusal's "lights" series. (Image courtesy of Arts Canteen)

Very far from these contemporary takes on ancient Arabic styles are the still-lives of Mohammed Abusal. His “lights” series, ranging from wedding lanterns to domestic lamps, hint at the importance of light, from celebrations to Gaza's daily [power cuts](#). A huge pink prickly pear cactus indicates that the plant is, among other things, a marker of destroyed Palestinian villages and a symbol of resilience and stubbornness bringing forth sweet fruit even without [water](#).

“I like to think of it as a place where unwanted things like snakes can take refuge,” El Saqqa explained. Abusal grows dozens of these cacti on the roof of his Gaza City home, so that he can observe them throughout the seasons.

## Subtle

Also deeply evocative of Gaza life is Nidal Abu Oun's "The Fisherman's Daughter," with its Salvador Dali-inspired vivid colors and precise brushwork. In classic surrealist style the images are allusive and multi-layered; the daughter is fused into her latticework chair, from which a heavily-pregnant belly protrudes. A basket of fish sits by her, in front of — what? The sea, or water pouring from a cracked wall, from which a dry tap pokes out? The girl and her homely surroundings have a sense of stillness and patience, but is it the terrible patience of the woman who never knows if her menfolk will return from their dangerous work?



Nidal Abu Oun's "The Fisherman's Daughter" (Image courtesy of Arts Canteen)

"One person who came to the launch of the exhibition asked, 'but where is the Palestinian flag?'" said El Saqqa. Each of these paintings, and the others in the exhibition, echo his response — "it's in every canvas."

While the occupation forces every Palestinian to be "political" in some sense by their very insistence on life, *Despite* has shown that Palestine's artists can negotiate and explore those politics in a myriad of different and subtle ways.

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