

A Review of the Book "Palestinian Art"

Part I: Why The Review Was Written

(An exhibition of the work of seven Palestinian artists was presented by the Swedish Government at the Konstakademien Vastra Galleriet (Royal Academy of Art) in Stockholm from August 17 through September 20th, 1998. It was accompanied by a hard-cover book titled "Palestinian Art." Mr. Ulf Thomas Moberg was both curator of the show and author of the book. No publisher is specified in the book, but it was printed by Almqvist & Eiksell, Uppsala 1998, copyright Cinclus, Box 14089, 161 14 Stockholm.)

Review by Samia A. Halaby, August 25, 1998

I was invited by the Swedish government to exhibit my paintings in Stockholm. Here is what happened to me and my fellow Palestinian artists after we had been assured that this would be an exhibition about art and that the choice of artist is based on what Swedes felt was their traditional support of Palestine.

The show was assigned to a curator whose primary qualification was that he was not connected to the government in an official way and who was in fact a charming individual. A central exhibition hall at the Royal Academy of Stockholm was assigned to the exhibition. But then the pro-Israeli lobby at the Academy heard of this and ousted the Palestinian show to a secondary exhibition hall. Meanwhile, it was arranged that an exhibition in the main hall would open two weeks after the Palestinian show and that it would be of a synagogue built out of paintings. It seems that Swedish government's support of Palestine must always impose something Israeli in some primary position vis-a-vis their support of Palestine. But, of course, it opened just before the Palestinian show.

The exhibition of Palestinian art was well curated and well installed and the opening was a good event but thinly attended as the show was not promoted in the press nor was the press allowed to meet the artists. And yes, in spite of a lot of air-ticket problems and a very inhospitable reception, we seven artist arrived in Stockholm for the exhibition ready willing and wanting to talk to the press, a press that was remarkable in its complete absence. The artists came, lived in a bubble of isolation for four days, and then left. We had only minimal and very controlled contact with only members of government agencies who were briefed on how to handle us. I would have loved to be in contact with Stockholm artists and art students.

A hard cover book was published along with the exhibition full of color photographs and a short introduction with seven chapters about the seven artists. The text of the book was not about art but rather a misinformed and insulting travelogue through Palestine with a shocking focus on the propaganda of Zionism. It is not much more than a servile gesture towards Zionist acceptance. The art historical value of the book lies in the color photographs of the paintings of the artists.

The title of the book implies a treatise on the art of Palestine which spans millennia, yet only the work of six contemporary artists is treated in the book. Confirming that the book is not a serious art historical treatise is the fact that the labeling of reproductions is limited to author, title, and date. The sizes and the media of the works is not included.

The book opens to the historically inverted view of Palestine through the eyes of a Swedish traveler of 1859 - about a century and a half before the show. The book gives us, Palestinian Arabs, a view of ourselves through the eye of a metaphorical telescope befogged by biblical attitudes and Eurocentricities. In this book, we Palestinians can see ourselves deep down the eye-piece of a microscope, there far away sliced thin and pasted onto a glass slide. Our cities are labeled in their Biblical versions. Versions made so familiar to Westerners through weekly Sunday prayers that a deep sense of ownership has overtaken them. Our national lands have become their "Holy Land." They see neither its history before the bible nor since the bible. Giving it to Zionism seems justified to them by the Hebrew origins of the Old Testament. The minuscule Jewish communities that have lived with us Arabs and whom we consider as Arab give them further justification rather than thought.

After this opening by a 19th Century European traveler, the author describes Palestine of that time as being the "Holy Land" -- a fountain head of spirituality a land unlike the hotbed of political and military strife of today, (nevermind that the strife was brought to us by Europeans) a land full of various peoples, (nevermind that most of them were moslem) each speaking their own language (nevermind that they all spoke Arabic) and all under the rule of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. The selective blindness of the author is unmistakable.

Throughout the book, Arabians, Christians, Jews, Moslems, Palestinians, as well as some others are all mentioned as though they were separate cultures living together. That all these are listed one after the other as though separate entities fulfilling thereby the hostile intentions of colonialists to divide and rule. Actually, my one self fulfills all the separately listed categories. I am an Arab of the Palestinian geographic area and my religion is non of your business.

There is too much mention of differences in religious affiliation of Arabs and too much of description of local customs in order to confirm the authors ideas of "ethnicity." He sees us as the ethnic other, while he is unaware that we see him and came visiting hoping for natural interaction. We did not expect this thick curtain of Swedish propaganda to be so effectively a barrier between us. Every opportunity to mention Christians and Christianity is exploited by him whether it is the presence of churches or the family history of individual artists. Islam is not similarly highlighted. However Judaism is heavily accented.

In this little monograph with an eleven thousand word essay about the work of seven Palestinian artists, the author finds an excuse to include mention of Hebrew writings several times even including a paragraph about the Hebrew script of the Old Testament. There is no mention of the fact that much of the bible survived through the Arabic language.

After each mention of a Palestinian city there is always a mention of Jewish history no matter how insignificant. Furthermore, to the novice, it is hard to know that Palestinians are Arabs. Those who know the Arab World from the inside will think the book is a nasty mix-up. Jewish history in the lands of Palestine is minimal compared to the millennia of continuous settlement by the Arabs and their ancestors and yet mention of Arab history is invisible. The book contains a cultivated absence of the name "Arab" and an equally cultivated abundance of the use of the word "Jew."

Whenever the tragedies of Palestinians are mentioned in the passive case. Tragedies such as rape, genocide, massacre of innocents, refugeecism, loss of land and home and relatives, and the ethnic cleansing are all mentioned as though the deed happened without a doer. Zionist and Israeli responsibility for the brutal destruction of Palestine and Palestinians is not mentioned. In fact the book contains a clear acceptance of the rights of Israel over Palestine by the mention of Israeli Independence and by the amazing concept that our homes and lands magically stopped being ours once Israel occupied them by European permission.

The book is full of discontinuities and misplaced information. The seeming innocence of misplaced fragmenst is belied by the obviously hostile implications therein embedded. These hostile fragments lie within a friendly but anemic description of the artists and their work.

The first chapter is about the artist Rana Bishara and it opens with the lengthy quotation from a Swedish traveler as described above. The quotation and accompanying commentary occupy more than a third of the text of this chapter which is supposed to be about the art of Rana Bishara.

The remaining text in the Bishara chapter concerns itself as much with visiting her village and various religious presence and practice in the area as much as with her work. In it the reader has no idea that Rana Bishara is an Arab or that her village is dominated by Israel. Those settlers who encircle her village and who killed the Palestinian Arab boy featured in one her works are not identified as Israelis.

In the Chapter about Jumana Al-Husseini whose work utilizes scripts, the author takes the opportunity to deal with the history of writing and finds occasion to include several lines about the Hebrew writing of the Old Testament. The gross opportunism of this is typical of the text as a whole.

Two other chapters are unusual in their deception. One of these is the chapter about Naser Soumi who has created several installation works in homage to Palestinian cities. Counting the lines one sees that only 52 are about Soumi and his work and 82 are about the history of the Cities Soumi treats. Furthermore, consistent

with the criticism above this history grossly reduces the significance of Arabic history to a few citations while stressing Old Testament and Jewish and Israeli history in relation to these cities.

Finally in the Chapter about Samir Salamah The author opens by telling us where Salamah was born and then takes that as an opportunity to expend a paragraph out of the four pages to tell us of the Jewish and Zionist history of that city.

For this reason I was driven to write the paper which follows. It was written under pressure with the hope that it might be duplicated and distributed at the show with the book. Of course the government agency in charge took ten days to print my paper which they said they will distribute to the press. They failed to tell me if it was in fact ever made available to the public at the show or with the book or made public at all.

The paper, as an open letter, attempts to do what the book sets out to do. It tells who we are and describes our art and its sources and influences.

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