

Why first intifada is back on Middle East art scene

In conjunction with a new exhibition, founders of the Palestinian contemporary art scene met in Beirut to discuss how the political events of their time influenced their work.

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Author: Sam Brennan

BEIRUT — “Palestinian art has always brought the struggle for freedom and the [Israeli] occupation to the people of the world,” Vera Tamari, a multidisciplinary artist, said to Al-Monitor. “A lot of the art that came out in the 1970s and 1980s reflected this through the symbolism of the time, but there has been a change of representation in Palestinian art. It has become more authentic in many ways.”

On April 30, the Beirut-based Dar El-Nimer for Arts and Culture, a Palestinian cultural organization, hosted four prominent figures and founders of the Palestinian contemporary art scene — Nabil Anani, Sliman Mansour, Tayseer Barakat and Tamari — to discuss the movement. Of particular focus was how their works had changed after the first intifada, the five-year-long uprising that began in 1987, two decades into the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Golan Heights and Gaza stemming from the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

“Our perception of art changed during the intifada,” Mansour told the audience. “When we started, we were very young, in our early 20s, and we wanted to set up a group for artists. The occupation forces were completely against this association,... but we were young and revolutionary and had lots of energy.”

Their energy was channeled into a string of galleries and artist associations. The outfits would periodically run into trouble with Israeli authorities, so names were often changed and locations moved to avoid suppression.

The art produced in those early years, although not lacking in passion, did not fully encapsulate the complex political situation and discontent of the people at the time.

Mansour said, “As an artist [before 1987], I thought we were documenting the past, but we had to move to another level because we were not in harmony with the people in the street.”

He further explained, “We were living in ... a cultural ghetto. We didn’t know what was going on in the rest of the Arab world or the world in general. We thought we created something great, but when we looked at other artists, we were just normal.”

(L-R) Vera Tamari, Nabil Anani, Tayseer Barakat and Sliman Mansour in 1988 (Dar El-Nimer)

Before the intifada, much of the work produced by Palestinian artists played on explicit symbols and involved traditional artistic styles. The symbols eventually became a language in and of themselves.

“Orange trees are a symbol of Palestine, or a part of Palestine that was occupied before 1967, while olive trees represent a part that was occupied after 1967,” Anani explained to Al-Monitor. “So, in a work where you find oranges, it means that the artist is talking about the coast of Palestine, and where you find olive trees, the artist is talking about [areas farther inland].”

As the intifada helped open Palestine to the rest of the world and highlighted the Palestinians' discontent, artists felt required to introduce more depth to their work and raise the level of creativity. “[Before the intifada], it was very hard to get art books,” Mansour explained to Al-Monitor.

At Dar El-Nimer Barakat had said, “The intifada led us to change. At the time we were conventional. We changed from symbolism to new visuals. We used local materials, we stopped working in simple symbols like the olive tree, keffiyeh and villages. We instead started to make art that went deeper.”

This development manifested itself in more abstract art, as seen in Tamari’s work with clay. Prior to the intifada, the Palestinian village was painted almost as a form of documentation, recording the architecture and natural environment. After 1987, however, Tamari incorporated clay from the land itself and even used broken traditional pottery to represent the history and reality of Palestine without relying on the usual symbols.

“At one point art was a documentation of reality using aesthetic means, but nowadays I think that new art is much more real.... It has additional layers of explanation and representation,” Tamari said, although the old symbols still sometimes creep into new abstract works.

In tandem with the discussion, Dar El-Nimer opened an exhibition featuring pieces by the artists, “Challenges of Identity,” which runs through May 11. Tamari is showcasing a new work consisting of six meter-long sheets of collaged fabric that combine images of women and an olive tree.

“I always use the theme of the olive tree,” Tamari told Al-Monitor. “[I also] previously used women in art, as a [matriarch], a person who is hard working and rooted in the land and is a symbol of authenticity, and I always admired the dexterity of Palestinian women.” She emphasized, “The woman is like the olive tree,” underscoring the durability of both with the passage of time. The combining of symbols and use of unconventional materials is emblematic of how contemporary art changed after the intifada.

Mansour noted that while events like the intifada revolutionized the work of Palestinian artists, current events — like the Great Return March launched in 2018 in Gaza, during which Israeli forces killed some 200 Palestinians — are unlikely to have a similar effect. The modern artists do not have a singular agenda anymore, Mansour said.

“The young generation now are open to many ideas, and they have seen lots of artwork,” Mansour said. “Young artists know about art history, and they are doing what they want to do. They already have this.”

Despite the growing sophistication of both artists and audiences, works made prior to the intifada remain salient for many, with political posters Mansour made in the 1970s and 1980s being reprinted and re-emerging online and in shops. Mansour is not particularly optimistic about this revival, telling Al-Monitor, “I think this is because nothing has changed on the ground. The occupation is still there.... Many people have developed bourgeois attitudes [and become comfortable], while others are very angry. So, nothing has changed from 40 years ago, and art is a part of that.”

The four artists believe that the shift they made in the late 1980s to produce more conceptual and novel art will be carried forward by others in the future.

“The new generation is very intelligent,” Bakarati told Al-Monitor. “They know new media, and they have been everywhere in the world, and they send our message to the outside world. They are competent, [fresh] and have a vision. This is perfect.”

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