

“Gaza Fashion Week” comes to London art gallery

Wed, 02/06/2013 - 14:15

[Sarah Irving](#) [The Electronic Intifada](#) [London](#) 5 February 2013



Tayseer Barakat's "Deir Ghassaneh"

Britain is, it seems, becoming the place to see Palestinian contemporary art. After exhibitions in [Manchester](#) and [London](#) in 2012 devoted to or with major representation of Palestinian artists, the capital has now upped the ante with the opening of P21, a gallery specializing in work by Palestinian artists or engaging with the theme of Palestine.

Visitors to P21's inaugural exhibition, *Refraction: Moving Images On Palestine*, may spot some old friends from Manchester Cornerhouse's [Subversion](#) show last Spring or RichMix's pre-Christmas [Despite](#) exhibition from Arts Canteen. The line of witty, bitter movie posters by Gazan twins Tarzan and Arab has been updated, presenting mock adverts for Israeli military operations ranging from 1972's Spring of Youth to [Cast Lead](#) in late 2008 and early 2009, with a new selection ending in November's eight-day attack on Gaza, [Pillar of Cloud](#).

The content of the posters has also moved on, with increasingly elaborate text, parodying the extended credits of Hollywood with "IDF Productions Present ... Pillar of Cloud ... Editing, Mixing and Lighting by Israel ... Assistant Director: Arab Governments ... Produced by USA ... Written & Directed by [Benjamin Netanyahu](#)." A series of festival prizes emblazoned along the top include an "Audience Award ... League of Arab States." The sarcasm couldn't be clearer.

Melancholy

As if to demonstrate the breadth of work on offer from contemporary Palestinian artists, another familiar name from recent UK shows is that of [Tayseer Barakat](#). Also originating from Gaza, though now based in [Ramallah](#), Barakat's subtle, nostalgic landscapes are the antithesis of Tarzan and Arab's exuberance, and *Refraction's* inclusion of paintings such as "Deir Ghassaneh" evokes a rural Palestine with ghostly images which highlight the danger of its loss.



In addition, *Refraction* includes paintings by Mohammed al-Hawajri, who was also featured in *Despite*. There, the emphasis was on his more angular, almost design-influenced pieces, incorporating Arabic script and calligraphy and references to classical Islamic art.

The pieces shown at *Refraction* are larger oils. One is a melancholy image of two cacti — symbols of Palestinian steadfastness — against a monochrome background. The other is a Gazan take on the classic still life, its familiar motifs of fruit, plants and tableware set against a view of a port and a shadowy ship — a Gazan fishing boat or an Israeli attack vessel?

It's unusual, of course, to find a gallery — not just a single exhibition — devoted to the theme of one nation. P21 is the fruit of years of work by a committed group in London, headed by the gallery's director, Yahya Zaloom, and an advisory board which includes retired Palestinian architect [Antoine Raffoul](#).

“It was a fight to finish the building,” said Raffoul. Initial funding from the Emir of Sharjah was cut, but P21 now boasts an elegant and versatile gallery space, designed by award-winning Egyptian architect Abdul Halim Ibrahim and located in the very heart of London.

“A global language”

Zaloom and Raffoul both stressed that P21's main audience is a Western one.

“We have been painted and categorized,” said Raffoul. “We want to say, we are not this or that. It's a global language, a language the West prefers not to hear.”

In addition to exhibitions like *Refraction* (and future shows focusing on Palestinian women artists and on the impacts of oil in the Middle East are

already in the pipeline), P21 is already hosting one-off events and discussion and reading groups in partnership with organizations such as the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

There are also plans to use the space to facilitate cooperation among Palestinian artists and curators, offering experience in putting on international shows.

“You see very interesting work in some exhibitions but the presentation is poor,” said Zaloom, “or there is good work and presentation but there is no documentation. We want Middle East curators to work with us on shows so when they go back they know what kind of language to talk, what kind of shows deliver an international message.”

The international message of P21 also means that the team will be looking for funding beyond its current Middle Eastern sponsors. “If you're dependent on money from the Middle East, people see you as being about propaganda,” Zaloom said. “And we are most certainly not.”

“Not just a trend”



A piece by art duo kennardphillips

The gallery's plans also incorporate an internship program, intended to encourage a lasting interest in Palestinian art among a new generation of artists, curators and critics.

"The East is becoming trendy," said Inzajeano Latif, a British photographer whose work is featured in the current exhibition. "But we don't want it to be seen just as a trend, we want it to be an integral part of global contemporary art."

As well as the long-term view implied by the internships, Latif stressed the importance of P21 as a permanent space, rather than a one-off show.

"In exhibitions it's always an aspect of this, a section of that, and people are excited about it for a while and then they move on," he said. "Here, I want people to have a sense of space and longevity."

In its commitment to having a long-term impact on both the art world and Western perceptions of and interactions with Palestine, the P21 team also stress the importance of displaying the best work available.

"It's about the content and quality of the work," according to Raffoul. "There is a fundamental concern for the final product. No one says about [well-known UK artist] Tracey Emin 'she's a half-Turkish artist.' It should be the same with us."

Raffoul explained his position with reference to another of his great passions, the Palestinian village of [Lifta](#), near [Jerusalem](#). "I'm a Palestinian, an architect, but I really care about Lifta because it is a very important piece of architecture," he said. "If it was in China I would still fight for it and preserve it."

This concern for finding art of an international standard which tells

important stories is abundantly clear amongst the works on show in *Refraction*. Berlin-based Palestinian artist Kamal Aljafari's works have been shown in big-name galleries such as [New York's](#) Whitney Museum. One of his contributions to *Refraction*, titled "Balconies," is a nostalgic evocation of this lost portion of Palestinian social life. As Antoine Raffoul put it, "we loved balconies in Palestine, we used to sit on them and the street was our theater. Now you can only sit on the roof, because that has somewhere to hide."

Shocking

Art duo kennardphillipps have likewise acquired an international reputation with its challenging photographic and installation work, tackling themes such as the [Iraq](#) war. And Palestinian artist Laila Shawa's hard-hitting pieces have also brought her a high global profile; her "Stealth Cross-Metamorphoses," a giant black crucifix with rocket-launchers dangling from the arms, managed to provoke offense even amongst P21's engaged audience.

Even more shocking, perhaps, is her video work "Gaza Fashion Week," which shows a woman clad in a *jilbab* (a loose-fit coat) and headscarf being forced to strip in an open-air cage at a [military checkpoint](#). The Israeli soldier's commands are conveyed to the woman by loudspeakers, compelling her to lift her head to try and work out where the sound is coming from, and to shout her replies into the ether. The work meshes the quasi-erotic act of publicly disrobing with a horribly stunning conclusion.

Alongside these international names are comparative newcomers such as [Jenin](#)-based video artist [Khaled Jarrar](#), who blends humor and skilful cinematography in satirical comments on life under Israeli occupation. In "Volleyball" we see a cheeky, slightly nervous Jarrar chipping away at [Israel's wall in the West Bank](#) with a stone chisel and sweeping up the resulting pile of dust and fragments of cement. On the floor near the video screen sits the

result of his foray: a volleyball made of the re-cast concrete, too heavy to easily move, let alone throw over the height of Israel's "barrier."

And in "Sea Level," Jarrar stands in a bustling Ramallah street, trying to flag down a taxi while wearing a full suit of diving gear. In a reflection of the bizarre social and economic "bubble" of the West Bank's capital, no one bats an eyelid at his bizarre garb. Eventually a cab does stop, and he is taken to the dilapidated "sea level" sign on the road between Jerusalem and the [Dead Sea](#) — about as close as the band of [settlements](#) ringing it allows Palestinians to get to this strange expanse of concentrated brine.

Refraction is an intense and provocative selection of contemporary art from Palestine, its diaspora and from non-Palestinian artists engaging with this most pressing of issues. As such, it is a worthy beginning for the P21 gallery and its ambitious vision of raising the profile of Palestine and its artists on the global stage.

All images courtesy of P21.

Refraction: Moving Images on Palestine is showing until 16 March. For further details, see www.p21.org.uk.

[Sarah Irving](#) is a freelance writer. She worked with the International Solidarity Movement in the occupied West Bank in 2001-02 and with Olive Co-op, promoting fair trade Palestinian products and solidarity visits, in 2004-06. She is the author of a [biography of Leila Khaled](#) and of the [Bradt Guide to Palestine](#) and co-author, with Sharyn Lock, of [Gaza: Beneath the Bombs](#).

- [art](#)
- [london](#)
- [P21](#)

- [Tayseer Barakat](#)
- [Operation Cast Lead](#)
- [#GazaUnderAttack](#)
- [Antoine Raffoul](#)
- [Lifta](#)
- [Iraq](#)
- [kennardphillipps](#)
- [Laila Shawa](#)
- [Khaled Jarrar](#)
- [Israel's wall in the West Bank](#)
- [Kamal Aljafari](#)
- [Inzajeano Latif](#)
- [Yahya Zaloom](#)