

A Comprehensive Introduction to Palestinian Art on Show at the Umm al-Fahm Gallery

More than 100 works by Palestinian artists are on view in this exhibition, making a statement of presence that is both the strength of the show and its weakness.

By [Galia Yahav](#) May 15, 2016

Nabil Anani's 'View from the West of Ramallah' (2013). Daniel Tchetchik

The duality that characterizes Palestinian art is a theme discussed in the catalog of the exhibition "The Identity of the Palestinian Artist: Between Tradition, Culture, Modernization and Globalization" (curator: Farid Abu Shakra), currently on view at the Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery. That duality has been accorded multiple names and descriptions over the years, recurring in exhibitions, articles, research studies, essays and commentaries. They are: localness and universality, tradition and modernity, folklore and multiculturalism, religious imperatives and the avant-garde, the private and the collective, individuality and nationalism, authenticity and contemporaneity, Arabism and Westernism, community and globalization. Here, too, these are the central tensions, divisions and identities in the light of which this art is examined and which it ostensibly reflects.

In practice, there are many powerful works on display that portray conflict or tension between two opposing elements or evoke an internal rift. In other cases it is only the disparity between motivation and ability.

More than 100 works are on view in the three-story gallery. The emphasis is on two-dimensional works, primarily painting and drawing, along with montages, prints, photographs and a few contemporary video creations. All the generations of Palestinian art are represented, from the veteran Sofi Halabi, an East Jerusalem artist who was active in the 1930s and 1940s, and Abed Abdi and Khalil Rayan, who is showing a 1975 bronze sculpture of a bag of labaneh (strained yogurt); down to Suleiman Mansour, Tayseer Barakat and Nabil Anani – the three tenors of Palestinian art – along with Anisa Ashkar and Samah Shehadeh.

There are some marvelous paintings and drawings in the exhibition, including the coffee paintings by Khaled Hourani (2015), in which the finjan (as the coffee pot is known in Hebrew) and the cups serve as a handle for a painterly study of realism and schematic drawing, black-and-white and color, naturalism and expressive release, and more. Hourani's "Zebra Copy Card" (2010) is a realistic painting of the "donkey-zebras" in Gaza – donkeys on which stripes were painted to replace zebras that died of starvation during Israel's Operation Cast Lead and became a gloomy allegory of the situation in the Gaza Strip. "Smoke," a charismatic pencil drawing by Samah Shehadeh from 2015, is a virtuoso self-portrait in which the face is obscured by a thick abstract stain, creating the effect of a missing image, as in a half-peeling fresco, and is also an ultra-contemporary provocation against the traditional veil, the selfie and the concept of the "decisive moment" in photography.

A 2015 drawing by Shehadeh shows the corner of a kitchen with a knife rack on which an ax and a scythe are also hanging – essential equipment for workers, such as butchers and farmers – and for planners of terrorist attacks. A self-portrait by Michael Halak (2011) is done in a widthwise format in which the artist paints himself holding his head between his hands in the midst of a shout and a simulated movement that doubles the image in the style of Magritte. Another Halak painting, from 2009, is of a man with a bubble escaping between his lips, as though he were

underwater, or someone being strangled who is breathing his last breath.



Samah Shehadeh's 'Smoke' (2015). Daniel Tchetchik

Other outstanding works are "Palestinian Village" by Nabil Anani (2011), done in the style of nave art and consisting of three registers – village, grove and hilltop, where a city of buildings like dense black cubes stands –

and the same artist's "View from the West of Ramallah" (2013), in which densely packed white homes fill the composition like a wallpaper pattern.

A beautiful small engraving by Manal Mahamid from 2002 shows a concrete pillar from which iron rods protrude upward. Disconnected from the structure, the pillar becomes a modest monument to scaffolds as such, to unfinished construction that will never be completed. Khader Washah's "Expulsion Number 1" (2011) is a painting done completely in black, in the wake of a photographic original, in which people are seen being loaded onto a van. In a Kafkaesque video from 2014 by Bashar Al Horoub, a man rides a bicycle through a corridor in an abandoned building and an electric door slams in his face repeatedly, opening only when he moves away, leaving him only a few meters of riding space.

There are also works dealing with embroidery (Butaina Abu Melhem, Fatma Abu Rumi), donkeys (Ashraf Fuahri), cactus (Walid Abu Shakra and others), the image of the refugee (Ahmad Cana'an) and calligraphy (Anisa Ashkar).

A little of everything

In his catalog article, the curator describes the participating artists as belonging to one of a number of groups. "The group of Palestinian artists who have Israeli citizenship; the group of Palestinian artists who have Israeli citizenship and do not cooperate with the authorities; the group of Palestinian artists who have Palestinian citizenship who receive grants and prizes both from Israel and the Palestinian Authority," Abu Shakra writes, and continues: "the group of Palestinian artists in the Palestinian Authority who are close to the supreme council of culture; the group of artists who are not close to the Palestinian Authority; and the group of artists who are active in the diaspora and among the refugees." [Translated from Hebrew]



Khader Washah's 'Expulsion Number 1' (2011). Daniel Tchetchik

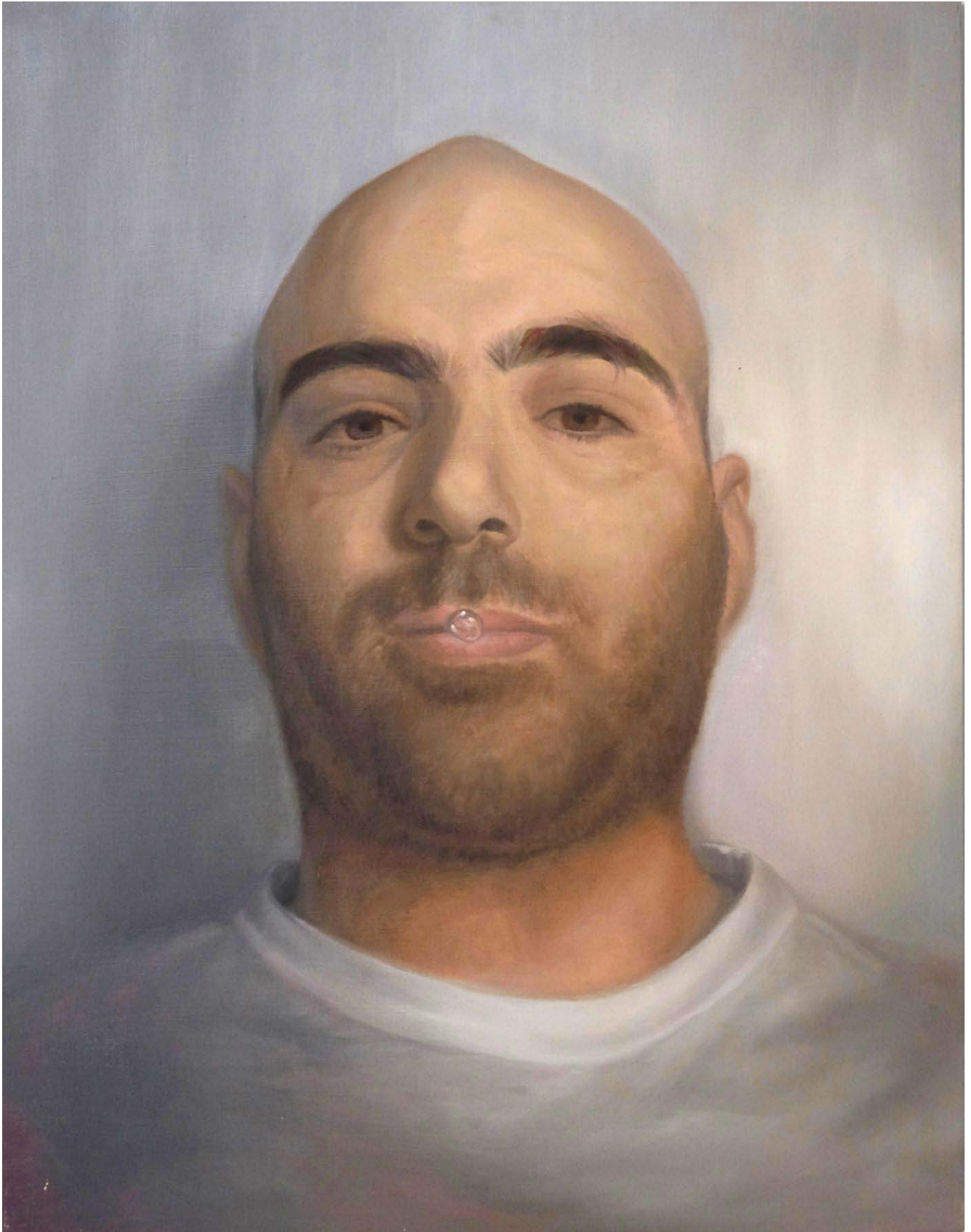
The exhibition appears to be as all-encompassing as possible, including artists from most of the groups mentioned by Abu Shakra. (This is a first exhibition on this theme, to be followed by a second in which additional artists from the PA, Gaza and the Palestinian diaspora will take part.) In contrast to the pretension of the mapping of the artists, the proportion of artists from the “generation of the state” and the “I generation” is very large compared to the proportion of contemporary and young artists. Together with many imitations of Picasso, van Gogh, Matisse, Moshe Kupferman, various Expressionists and representatives of the School of Paris, what stands out is the ambitious realistic painting and drawing and an engagement with photography and video.

The strength of the exhibition lies in its demonstration of presence, of quantity. There's a little from every generation, a little of everything, like a tasting menu. As a supermarket of generations, artistic methods, themes

and creative figures, the exhibition affords an excellent opportunity for an initial acquaintance with the foundations of Palestinian art. It's like a starting index from which one can proceed to plunge more deeply into the world of each artist. In racist-struck Israel this may well be more than enough. It may even generate a greater impact than an ultra-sophisticated show for the cognoscenti.

But the opposite thought also arises. One hopes that the Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery , and Palestinian art overall, will not try to create a cautious average, calculated to the last brushstroke and aimed at a range of imagined audiences, but will take a more contemporary and more trenchant approach. That it will stop being "Palestinian art toward" various trends and not mount "betwixt and between" exhibitions, but will actualize the privilege of art to provide a piercing critique of the present.

Umm al-Fahm Art Gallery, Haifa St., Umm al-Fahm (04) 631-5257; Sun.-Thurs. and Sat. 09.00-16.00; exhibition closes Nov. 19, 2016



Michael Halak, self-portrait, 2011. Daniel Tchetchik

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