

Childhood in Palestinian Art I: Abdulrahman Katanani

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(Illustration: Abdulrahman Katanani)

By: [Amany Al-Sayyed](#) (/author/amany-al-sayyed)

Published Friday, December 9, 2011

The reality of growing up in one of Lebanon's camps is not just restricted to the age of childhood. For adults, childhood turns into a formative state of being etched into memory and at times expressed in art of all forms.

In this series, two young Palestinian artists reveal the impact and presence of childhood in Palestinian art, including their own work.

Abdulrahman Katanani: The Power of Child Play

For Abdulrahman Katanani, a 29-year-old illustration artist born and raised in the Sabra Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, "everything a Palestinian

child does carries with it a cause, even something as simple as playing.”

Katanani chose the theme of children in his latest illustrations. Of his own childhood memories, the young artist recalls how his family used to share housing with twenty other families on one floor of an apartment building in the camp.

In his adult years as an illustrator – with projects displayed in Beirut, Malaysia, and London – Katanani earned a Masters degree in Fine Arts from the Lebanese University, and has written a dissertation on the renowned Palestinian illustrator Naji al-Ali, who was assassinated in 1987.

From Katanani’s perspective, the typical child in Sabra is something other than a product of the camp’s corrupt political environment, or the nation’s systemic discrimination against the refugee Palestinian, or even the camp’s unsustainable living conditions.

A child continues to learn how to play within his/her civic and geographical surroundings despite the camp’s darkest corners, its littered roads, and its sharpest barbed wire.

“If a child’s will is broken, or if this was truly a psychological dilemma, then he/she would never be able to smile in an environment that makes it almost impossible to do so. The camp’s narrow ally is not an amusement park: it is dark, humid, and dirty. Yet you find the child playing there,” Katanani says.

According to the artist, there is an important lesson here for adult residents of the camp. “Even though he may not realize it, this child is teaching us adults in the camp a lesson. We adults who went to universities, travelled the world, learned various technologies, and learned the facts about the socio-political problems of the camp, we sit around and do nothing about our condition,” Katanani says.

As a visual artist and illustrator, what matters for Katanani is the re-conceptualization of the camp, in other words, “getting the picture right.”

“When our grandparents left Palestine for Lebanon, the idea was to be back after six days, not sixty years and counting. We were never meant to stay here in the camps, so it is extremely faulty logic to say our mission is only to protect the existence of the camp. Our mind is supposed to be geared towards our return to our land first, and then towards the camp,” he says.

Redirecting attention to Palestine as “home” for the child in the camp is part of the overall picture. Katanani explains, “The child in Sabra today has, metaphorically speaking blown up the camp, because it is in his power to re-create it in his own image. And by making his toys or objects of play from materials like garbage compost, he has shown that the camp is not us, it is not our final destination, that the ‘picture is not right’ if it stays like this forever. Things must change.”



Abdulrahman Katanani, a 29-year-old illustration artist born and raised in the Sabra Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.

Reminiscent of a school science project that requires the student to create something from recycled material, Katanani’s latest installation *Zinco, Barbwire, and Freedom* represents the idea of production-based creativity for children.

Katanani’s past involved many years of carpentry, which now manifests itself in his use of drills, woodcuts and zinco (corrugated tin) to create pieces from scratch.

“I cut the zinco with my carpentry tools to create the silhouette of a girl or boy. Then, I bring used pots and pans, I flatten them, then twist and shape them to form something like a girl’s red skirt or red hair band or red hat. I do not use paint to color my work. I also collect Pepsi bottle caps found on the

ground in the camp, or used fabric from the women in the camp, and I make something out of that,” says the artist.

It is clear that Katanani’s art-making resembles children’s play-making. Both of them are artists learning how to play for life and for liberation.

The Sabra-child does his/her ‘school science project’ by using materials from the camp. But if one conceives of schools such as UNRWA, or local Lebanese universities, to be formal sites of education for Palestinians in Lebanon, in what ways does the camp environment act as an informal site for children?

For Katanani, his grandfather’s stories were part of his literacy as a Palestinian. “I remember during the Aoun war in Lebanon, for example, I stayed at my grandfather’s house. Before living in Lebanon, he was a fighter in Palestine. He would always tell me stories about the operations he ran against the Israeli military during the British occupation,” he says.

Even though Katanani attended a private school as a child – as opposed to the UNRWA schools around his neighborhood – his literacy in Palestinian issues came primarily from his engagement with his grandfather’s memories and narratives.

“My grandfather was sentenced to death twice by British rule but managed to escape. He used to tell me much about the name of the streets in Palestine and details about historic figures like Abdul Qader al-Husseini, who was one of the founders of the Palestinian resistance. He would go to Jaffa regularly, so he knew all the stories, the streets, the oral history. I learned from my grandfather the importance of doing something for Palestine,” he explains.

In middle school, however, Katanani’s interest turned towards his other ‘teacher,’ Naji al-Ali and his famous figure, Hanzala.

“He was a symbol known by all of us young Palestinian kids at school. At this age, most of our antagonism was geared against the Arab world and particularly Lebanon, because during my childhood years, Lebanon banned construction material from entering the camps,” Katanani says.

At the time, the camp was also under siege by Lebanese and Syrian forces, so every time young Katanani went to school he “had to go past Lebanese and Syrian soldiers. The way they treated us was insulting and discriminating.”

It was under these conditions as a child, and later as an adolescent, that the artist got to know about Naji al-Ali.

“To know Hanzala, you have to know Naji al-Ali, and to know Naji al-Ali is to know that he was assassinated, and to understand this you need to learn about the political factions. Despite all the difficult details, I learned that the road to Palestine is clear. It is in daily resistance, loyalty, and patience. When I was a child, I thought of weapons or political factions in order to fight. But Naji al-Ali taught me that the doorway to Palestine is not just through factions.”

What has essentially evolved after Naji al-Ali’s Hanzala in today’s Palestinian art is the belief that there can be great artists after Naji al-Ali – a concept that was absent amongst Palestinian camp communities.

“For a long time, we had always carried with us in our community the faulty logic that no one can be as great as Naji al-Ali, Mahmoud Darwish, or Ghassan Kanafani. But the truth is, all of these incredible artists taught us that Palestine does not belong to just one person, or one vision, that it belongs to all. And so does art,” says Katanani.

So he is inspired to continue his work in his own style, spirit, and method. One example Katanani gives that sets him apart from Naji al-Ali, is that he has “many children not just one. Each child represents any displaced child in the world, generically. My children are feature-less because they represent a universal condition of survival under dire conditions.”

Katanani’s future work will involve more installations about children from the camp, which will lead to more local and foreign exhibitions.

“I want my message to reach the world. I want everyone to see that the children of the camp are overcoming obstacles through their imagination. And just like them, as long as there is debris in my home, I will continue making art,” he declares.

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