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A Look at Palestinian Artists in "A Banquet For Seaweed: Snapshots from the Arab 1980s"

by Callie Storie | January 21, 2023



The CVAD Gallery at the University of North Texas is tucked away on the northeast side of campus, nestled within the recently renovated art building. It serves as a bit of sanctuary from the usual hustle and bustle of campus, a place for students and visitors alike to recharge, away from the looming to-do lists that follow them around. The gallery keeps busy with three exhibitions a year, each open long enough to fill up the calendar. I have been specifically looking forward to the show *A Banquet for Seaweed: Snapshots from the Arab 1980s*, curated by Dr. Nada Shabout. Featuring works from the Barjeel Art Foundation and other private collections, *A Banquet for Seaweed* includes more than twenty works by artists from eight countries across the Arab world.

Walking into the gallery, I was immediately struck by a giant Neo-Expressionist canvas stapled to the wall. The deep shades of blue, purple, and orange in Nabil Kanso's *Gazing into the infinite* are heightened by the rich blue of the wall behind it, which wraps around the entirety of the back of the gallery. Other vibrantly painted panels add a warmth to the space – an orange one behind the welcome desk contrasts with a shredded black and white canvas by Khalil Rabah; a dark blue panel in the middle of the gallery provides information about the exhibition in English, Arabic, and Spanish; and the green panel behind it holds Shakir Hassan Al Said's work from 1983, *Jala Aidun (Evacuation, We Will Return)*. The blue panel tells us that the exhibition relates the story of resilient creativity in the face of the turbulent 1980s in the Arab World. The featured artists engage with the poignant issues that plagued the decade, while negotiating with despair, new realities, and oftentimes, living in the diaspora.

Suleiman Mansour's *Olive Field* greeted me as I turned to the more subtle white wall to the right of the entrance. At first glance, *Olive Field* appears to be just a serene landscape. The large, strong olive trees are uniformly planted across a field, yet you can see Mansour has lovingly individualized them with unique curves of their trunks and colors in the leaves. The olive trees are hugged by rock walls that wind through the landscape. The ground pulls you in with heavy brushstrokes of oranges and whites and yellows. Though appearing tame by today's standards, a Palestinian painting a field of olive trees in 1980



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Suleiman Mansour, "Olive Field," 1980, oil on canvas, 107 x 107 x 3 centimeters. Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation.

The origins of this tradition can be traced back as early as World War II, when the relationship between Palestinian Arabs and Jews became strained as both advocated for their own state in the land of Palestine. During the 1948 Israeli War of Independence, which resulted in the creation of the nation-state, approximately 770,000 Palestinians were forced to flee their homes and were never given the opportunity to return. An additional 350,000 Palestinians were displaced throughout the course of the June 1967 war, in which Israel conquered the few remaining areas of historic Palestine – the Old City of Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza.

The indigenous Palestinians who were able to remain in Israel were subject to a complex web of both official and unofficial sanctions that hindered their daily lives. In the late 70s, these unofficial sanctions began to affect the Palestinian art movement in Israel. Soldiers from the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) began to systematically confiscate and destroy artwork from art exhibitions that they deemed too political. In 1980, these sanctions became official when Israeli law forbade the creation of artwork composed of the four colors of the Palestinian flag – red, green, black, and white – as well as any artwork that had “political significance.” These restrictions pushed Palestinian artists to create an iconography of national symbols that seemed benign to the eyes of the IDF, but revolutionary to those in the know.

Mansour joined a group of artists in 1972 who were interested in hosting art exhibitions in the West Bank and Gaza. After Mansour’s work was repeatedly confiscated by Israeli forces in the 1970s, he began to paint a new symbol to



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beginning in 1967, Israeli forces began to violently uproot olive trees on Palestinian land as a method of land acquisition. In response, Mansour co-opted the image of an olive tree in many of his works — *Olive Field* is just one example.

The olive trees appear solid and unmoving, representing the steadfastness of the Palestinian people in times of extreme hardship. Mansour has said, "In the same way that the trees can survive and have deep roots in their land so, too, do the Palestinian people." As I spent more time with this painting, it started to transform before my eyes. The innocuous rock walls began to look like snakes, slithering through the field and surrounding the trees. The triangular split of the walls began to look like wide-open jaws, ready to snap down and eat the unexpected trees. Suddenly the scene felt insidious; perhaps it was a premonition of the fate of the olive trees so lovingly captured by Mansour.

At the far end of the wall, serving as a bookend to works by Mohammed Melehi, Ali Jabri, and Helen Zughuib, is Asim Abu Shakra's *Cactus with City in the Background*. Palestinian Abu Shakra lived in Israel until his untimely death in 1990 at age twenty-nine. Living and working in Tel Aviv, the young Abu Shakra struggled to reconcile his Arab identity with his role in Israeli art circles. Even after years in the city, he continued to feel a sense of foreignness, a theme that materialized often in his work.



Asim Abu Shakra, "Cactus with City in the Background," 1989, oil on paper, 140 x 105 centimeters. Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation

Similar to Mansour, Abu Shakra drew on Palestinian iconography to express his feelings around the reality of being Palestinian in Israel. The cactus, or the



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indigenous to the Palestinian countryside and is known for its tenacity and its deep network of roots which make the cactus virtually impossible to exterminate. Palestinians saw themselves in this thorny plant — as people who were rooted and grounded in their homeland.

Abu Shakra took this idea a step further when he saw a potted cactus on one of his neighbor's window sills. Just like this *sabra*, Abu Shakra had been uprooted and isolated in Tel Aviv. He translated this feeling of alienation into his work, painting a dark and moody cityscape in the background, with a large potted cactus in the windowsill. The viewer appears to be standing in an interior, looking through the window to Tel Aviv's skyline. Though the canvas evokes melancholy, we are able to get a glimpse of Abu Shakra's domestic interior, a private space from which the artist drew hope.

Adjacent to *Cactus with City in the Background* are two white panels that flank a white pedestal holding a bulky CRT TV. The TV is playing *Bird Dog*, a kinetic painting that artist Samia Halaby programmed on a Commodore Amiga 1000 in 1985. To the left of Halaby's work is Laila Shawa's *Moon Walkers*, part of her *Women and the Veil* series. The canvas features twelve women in brightly colored *niiqabs*, clumped together under a crescent moon.

I was instantly drawn in by the work's bold hues, which suggest a sense of levity. However, as I spent more time with the women in the painting, I noticed that despite the uniquely colored veils, the figures appear mask-like and empty. Their eyes are the same shape and shadowy color, and their skin is the same shade. The women pictured are inherently devoid of individuality. Characteristic of Shawa's signature use of bright, bold colors to contrast heavy subject matter, *Moon Walkers* was the artist's response to veiling practices being forced upon women in her home of Gaza in the 1980s.



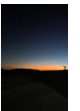
Laila Shawa, "Moon Walkers," 1988, acrylic on canvas, 75 x 100 centimeters. Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation.



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and the Gaza Strip organized their first united, sustained, mass-based popular revolt in 1987. The objective was clear – they were advocating for the end of the Israeli occupation and forging a path for an independent Palestinian state. This is now known as the First *Intifada*.

Palestinian women had a crucial role in the resistance. They launched labor strikes, boycotts of Israeli goods, and mass demonstrations. Their boycotts put real economic pressure on Israel to negotiate for the first time. They also organized economic cooperatives, which lowered the cost of the uprising on Palestinians. They worked with farmers to reduce their reliance on Israeli products, helped women set up businesses to become financially independent, and created clandestine classrooms for children to continue their studies.

Despite Palestinian women’s efforts towards national liberation, however, their rights were being stripped by supporters of the Mujama’, an Islamic charity that emerged as a political force in the 1970s and 80s. The Mujama’ promised its followers a political community that would confront the occupation without being exposed to danger, an understandably attractive idea in Gaza in the 1980s. In exchange, their followers would agree to a moral social code that was born out of the Mujama’s interpretation of Islam. One of the most staunch positions the Mujama’ took was that women should cover their hair with a *hijab*. Though the Mujama’ proportionally had a small following in Gaza, they established a sort of cultural dominance over the region. Soon it became dangerous for women to leave their homes with their hair uncovered, as they would become victims of verbal threats and physical violence by those wishing to enforce this code. Eventually, the *hijab* was nationalized and was framed as a sign of women’s political commitment to the *Intifada*.

Staunchly opposed to mandatory veiling, Shawa argued that the practice of veiling has no basis in religion, but rather is used as a social practice to control and subdue women. She cited Palestinian women’s crucial role in the *Intifada* as a reason for the widespread demands for women to don a *hijab* in her hometown in the late 1980s. She believed Palestinian women’s newfound political agency was seen as threatening to some, and in turn, the women had to be suppressed.

To the right of Halaby’s *Bird Dog* is a work by Ahmed Nawash. He was born in a Palestinian village named Ain Karem in 1934, but when he was fourteen, during the *Nakba* his family was forced to leave their home and settle in Jordan. He began making art in his adolescence as a way to work through the trauma of leaving his home country.

Nawash was never able to return home to Palestine, so he became a typical Palestinian refugee: intimately tuned in to the daily news of his nation’s ongoing tragedies. He saw the *Nakba* not as a single event that ended in 1948, but rather an ongoing event that began that year. He recognized that his pain was not just his own, but rather shared by his entire community. He channeled



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Ahmed Nawash, "The People's Uprising in Palestine," 1988, oil on canvas, 88 x 100 centimeter.
Courtesy of the Barjeel Art Foundation.

Nawash painted *The People's Uprising in Palestine* just a few months after the First *Intifada* began. This canvas is typical of Nawash's oeuvre, which is comprised of melancholy, dreamlike compositions and unnatural human figures whose bodies do not follow classic standards of proportion, dimension, or symmetry. His beings seem to take up space in an indistinguishable void instead of a tangible world. They are constantly in motion, yet there is no clear narrative to help decipher a direction or progression in space or time. It's unclear if they are departing or arriving, if they are heading somewhere or stuck on a path that leads nowhere. The stillness and silence of the setting feels tangible. Late artist and art critic Kamal Boullata once said that Nawash's work seems "to reveal the hallucinations of one unable to scream." With each piece, Nawash let his emotions make stylistic choices, from line to proportions to color palette. He poured his sadness and frustration and sense of loss into each canvas, yearning for the restoration of his homeland.

Behind these panels, one last room holds Walid Raad's *Scratching on things I could Disavow* and a timeline of major events that occurred in the Arab world in the 1980s. To follow the pathway out of the exhibition, viewers once again hit the blue wall that holds works from Osman Ahmed, Hamed Nada, and Dia al-Azzawi, among others. Though here I've only explored four works in the exhibition, all twenty-four pieces offer a unique story about the artist's lived experience.

Abdullah Al-Muharraqi tells of the shift in the economy of his home of Bahrain from one supported by pearl diving to oil rigs in *Eternal Torment*. Faisal Laibi Sahi's *The Fruit Seller* celebrates the vibrancy of Iraqi culture. A delicate bird sculpture by Adam Henein tells of his influence on crafting a uniquely Egyptian modernism, while an emotive sculpture by Kuwaiti artist Sami Mohammed honors victims of a 1982 massacre in Lebanon. Though the



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A Banquet for Seaweed: Snapshots from the Arab 1980s will be on display at the CVAD Gallery at the University of North Texas through January 28, 2023.

Footnotes

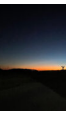
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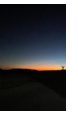
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