

# Art Exhibitions Engage in Palestinian “Existential Contest”

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Eleni Zaras



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Special Report

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*By Eleni Zaras*

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**“THE VERY EXISTENCE** of Palestine and its people is at stake today,” Columbia University Professor Rashid Khalidi declares in the catalogue to “Keyword Palestine: II,” the Middle East Institute’s latest exhibition.

Indeed, under the current U.S. administration, Palestine has been increasingly undermined, excluded and discredited through disinformation, accusatory rhetoric and aggressive policies.

Two art exhibitions in Washington, DC this spring engage in this “existential contest,” as Prof. Khalidi dubs it. MEI’s exhibition doubles as a silent auction in support of the Khalidi-led Institute for Palestine Studies (IPS), and the Museum of the Palestinian People’s newest exhibition, which centers on the art of five Palestinian women living in diaspora. While the two differ greatly in size and scope, both testify to Palestinian existence, cultural heritage and global solidarity.

## MEI’S “KEYWORD PALESTINE: II”

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On March 2, MEI opened their third exhibition, “Keyword: Palestine II.” Hundreds of pieces of art cover the walls of the main gallery space as well as the halls in the lower classroom level. The works up for auction were all donated by the artists; about half of whom are Palestinian and the other by Arab artists of differing nationalities. While the

show naturally gravitates around Palestine, the donated works vary visually and thematically, in contrast to MEI's previous exhibitions, which curated works around more specific guiding questions.

The result is somewhat overwhelming, as the works on the upper level sometimes compete for wall space and attention. Yet they are still carefully curated, aesthetically rather than thematically, and the juxtapositions of colors, compositions and textures are symbiotic.

Most works are wall hangings, whether paintings, drawings, photographs, prints or mixed media, but a few sculptures dot the upper level, as well. Larger pieces are reserved for the main gallery, such as Khaled Jarrar's "Good at Shooting, Bad at Painting," the title of which completely reframes the abstract, splatter-painted piece reminiscent of Jackson Pollock.

Big-name artists are subtly slipped into the mix, such that the untrained eye might not be able to distinguish the youngest artist from the most established. Artworks are labeled, but the labels are sometimes reserved to the edges of the gallery walls, as opposed to directly below or adjacent to the work. Removing this distraction of names and labels gives us the chance to more leisurely and objectively decide which pieces resonate with us more than others. Yet, there are surely eager buyers clambering for pieces by the likes of Nabil Anani, Tayseer Barakat, Samia Halaby, Mona Hatoum and the many other world-renowned artists on display.

Subject matters range from the overtly political, such as the wall hanging "Carpet Made of Barbed Wire" by Abdul Rahman Katanani, to quiet landscapes, like Georges Hanna Sabbagh's untitled watercolor, and the abstract and theoretical pieces, such as Amer Shomali's spools of thread for "Broken Weddings in Lifta."

However, uniting them all are two overarching goals. The first, as Khalidi articulates, is "to showcase that Palestine [and] Palestinians produce art and culture; to show a side that people aren't aware of," and the second, "to show that everything we're told about Arabs not caring about Palestine isn't true: People's hearts are still with Palestine."

As an auction, this show differs from MEI's two previous exhibitions and signals the broadening of IPS' vision.

IPS strives to "renew and rejuvenate" the institute with "arts and culture," explains Khalidi. Notably, IPS-Ramallah hosted a talk in 2019 by Samia Halaby and IPS envisions increasing publications—in English and Arabic—on arts and culture. This Washington, DC exhibition was also notably preceded by a similar event in Beirut in 2018, which featured many of the same artists, but this second edition of "Keyword: Palestine" drew greater participation with pieces by an additional 60 new artists.

**"ART OF PALESTINIAN WOMEN" AT THE MUSEUM OF THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE**

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In the galleries of the Museum of the Palestinian People (MPP), just north of MEI and next door to Middle East Books & More, visitors are welcomed by a video featuring wind-swept sand dunes, where five figures cloaked in dark billowing garments float, stagger and dance toward nothingness. The winds are high, rippling the fabric and sand, and heighten the drama of the slow, deliberate movements of the bodies in the empty landscape. Reflecting on time and existence, this black and white video, "Dune" by Australian-Palestinian artist Lux Eterna, sets the tone for the show "Art of Palestinian Women." Opened on March 6, the exhibition features art by five women of Palestinian descent living across the globe.

The small gallery dedicated roughly a third of its space to this exhibition of video, photography, painting and mixed media works. The artists include Malak Mattar in Gaza, where her family was displaced after the *Nakba*, Dana Barqawi in Jordan, Lux Eterna in Australia, and Manal Deeb and Samar Hussaini in the United States.

Of the more than 100 artists who responded to an open call, curator Nancy Nesvet selected these five women from the diaspora who "carry traditions with them." Opening just in time for International Women's Day (March 8), Nesvet hopes that the exhibition addresses, first and foremost, the "journey of heritage of the Palestinians into diaspora." The artworks evoke aspects of traditional Palestinian arts and culture as well as their existential threats.

Manal Deeb layers calligraphy with expressive portraits sketched and rendered realistically in paint. Superimposed, the faces of women or image of a child hauntingly rupture text, patterns, and the surface of the canvas, which itself is painted in streaks or clouds of brown, black, grey and gold.

By contrast, Malak Mattar's paintings are more sculptural, abstract portraits of women, reminiscent of Palestinian artist Nabil Anani, and have been compared to Picasso. Using bold colors and carefully constructed body language, like a tilt of an eyebrow or the cross of an arm, the women look out and demand the viewer's attention.

Inspired by traditional fashion, Samar Hussaini paints with blended colors and abstracted *tatreez* (embroidery) patterns. She then collages activism articles written by her father onto the canvas, and finally sculpts these layered canvases into *thobes*.

In the final section, the photographs by Lux Eterna and Dana Barqawi, hanging adjacent to each other, delve more politically into the existential threats facing Palestinian culture. Lux Eterna's series of eight portraits of women from different indigenous cultures addresses the reality of endangered homelands and hijacked agency. Her portraits specifically challenge the colonial gaze that dominated photographic representation of indigenous women in the 19th-20th centuries. The settings and attire were chosen by the subjects themselves, restoring agency to their own representation.

Dana Barqawi also challenges colonial optics of photography by manipulating early 20th century photographs of Palestinians, available through the digital archives of the Library of Congress. The photographs, predating the *nakba*, were deliberately chosen to discredit the widely cited phrase, "A land without a people for a people without a land," that served to justify Zionist colonial settlements in Palestine. By enhancing these photographs with color, gold leaf, or embroidered patterns, she "use[s] beauty as a tool to attract the viewer," she explains. Yet Barqawi is sure to point out the underlying "political agenda to challenge the erasure" of Palestinian peoples' history and cultural heritage.

This exhibit brings together works that aim to overturn how we view images of, and how we perceive, Palestinians. It makes clear that these artists, along with many others, are guiding the reorientation of conversations and perceptions about Palestinian women, history, arts and culture.

## "A CULTURAL ISSUE"

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Given the Trump administration's unbridled support of Israel, to the detriment of Palestinian people and territory, celebrations of the existence of Palestinian people and heritage, as seen in these two exhibitions, become increasingly relevant and urgent, especially in Washington, DC.

As Khalidi said in his remarks on the opening night of the MEI exhibition, “the Palestine issue and people are not simply a political cause, issue, or something to be dealt with. It’s not just a Palestinian issue, but an Arab issue; [it’s] not just a political issue, but a cultural issue.”

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