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## Ari on Makhoul and Hon, 'The Origins of Palestinian Art'

**Author:** Bashir Makhoul, Gordon Hon

**Reviewer:** Nisa Ari

**Bashir Makhoul, Gordon Hon.** *The Origins of Palestinian Art*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013. 269 pp. \$35.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-84631-953-2.

**Reviewed by** Nisa Ari (MIT Architecture)

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Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon's recent publication—*The Origins of Palestinian Art*—contributes to the modest field of modern and contemporary Palestinian art, previously sketched out by Gannit Ankori's book *Palestinian Art* (2006) and Kamal Boullata's book *Palestinian Art: 1850-2005* (2009). The authors of all three publications use the national designation of *Palestinian* in their book titles to encompass work made by those artists from among a fragmented diaspora, a growing refugee population, those living under military occupation in the West Bank and

Gaza, and even a significant number of Israeli citizens. In so doing, the authors seek to cement the relationship between the production of art and the construction of a nationalism contingent on the existence of a Palestinian identity. As a self-proclaimed third voice in the field, Bashir Makhoul and Gordon Hon's study promises to advance the discussion of the past decade, even if the title, perhaps, points us to more of the same.

Fortunately, Makhoul and Hon confront the expression "Palestinian art" head on in the first two chapters. They also critically expand the field through their theoretical focus on the origins of Palestinian art in relation to the events of 1948, or what Palestinians refer to as the *nakba* (catastrophe). Ankori and Boullata's previous studies on the subject had both argued that the history of Palestinian art began substantially before 1948, before the destruction of Palestinian villages and urban centers, the exile of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs, and Israel's declaration as an independent state. The authors touched upon cultural objects produced prior to 1948, such as Christian icon paintings and *Fellahi* embroidery, to make connections between Palestinian cultural practices that existed before the *nakba* and the emergence of modern art processes and media in later decades. Both Ankori and Boullata presented a history of art as proof of a self-consciously developed Palestinian existence before the formation of Israel and their emphasis on continuity sought to affirm that pre-*nakba* art was a "vital cultural genealogical force." [1] Ankori and Boullata's evidence aligned with the arguments of historian Rashid Khalidi, who rejected the Zionist lens in his 1997 book entitled *Palestinian Identity*, and their political undergirding conformed with the widespread desire for a two-state solution.

Not only do Makhoul and Hon disclose their political stance of advocating a one-state solution (and thereby reducing the acute need to press on pre-1948 claims of authenticity), but *origins*, as the text unceasingly reminds the reader, is the other keyword in their title. Drawing most heavily on Edward Said's notions of beginnings, Makhoul and Hon distinguish the term "origin" from the concept of "beginning:" a beginning "encourages non-linear development, a logic giving rise to a multileveled coherence of dispersion," whereas an origin "centrally dominates what derives from it" (pp. 2-3). In other words, whereas Ankori and Boullata endeavored to teach us about the beginnings of Palestinian art, Makhoul and Hon are attempting to understand something of its immediate origins. Rather than locate the origins in biblical times, like the Zionists, or in the mid-nineteenth century as Ankori and Boullata do, the *nakba*, they argue, is the inescapable driver of a coherent "Palestinian art." According to them, the *nakba* is an ongoing event and Palestinian art, often characterized by thematics of displacement, division, and loss, is symptomatic of the continuing *nakba* and the unsettling sense many Palestinians have of a "perpetual present tense in which historical events are still taking place" (p. 11). It is for this reason, they argue, that a Palestinian work from 1978 and one from 2008 can be viewed as siblings, even though they are a generation apart.

*The Origins of Palestinian Art* provides a survey of contemporary Palestinian art practice between 1948 and the present, while the structure of the text follows its theoretical refutation of a teleological narrative. Following the first two chapters, which parse the idea of the origin in relation to theories of nationalism and postcolonialism, chapters 3 through 6 dig into the artwork. Loosely defined, chapter 3, "Origin and Disaster," explores how the *nakba* filters

through the materials, structures, and concepts within Palestinian art and, particularly, how its disastrous effects often have eluded verbal or visual articulation, nudging artists to experiment sonically and somatically. Chapter 4, “Jerusalem as the Navel and the Blind Spot,” highlights the polarity of Jerusalem’s role in contemporary art: before 1967, most artists saw the city as the symbolic national center, whereas more recently, artists (including those working before 1967) sometimes mock Jerusalem as an elusive “national hallucination” (p. 113). The fifth chapter, one of the strongest, entitled “Inside the Line: Palestinians in Israel,” explores the pockmarked terrain many artists living in Israel must navigate. Rather than emphasize the problems of art production in this milieu, Makhoul and Hon draw out the vocabulary of irony, absurdity, power, and sexuality which makes up both the necessary arsenal and the innovative uniqueness in the work of artists such as Asad Azi, Abed Abdi, Jumana Manna, Sharif Waked, and Fahed Halabi.

Finally, chapter 6, “Al-Shataat: A Coherence of Dispersion,” explains how the Arabic word *al-shataat*, which literally means breaking apart, but also carries with it the idea of an implied, original whole, communicates the contradictory images of Palestine as “a place fragmented by catastrophe and also as an intact shape” (p. 197). Not only do the authors suggest that this linguistic linchpin unifies the careers of artists working in the diaspora, such as Emily Jacir, with those within the occupied territories, but they also argue that it resonates with the imagery and materials found within particular artworks. In Sliman Mansour’s piece *10 Years of Mud* (2004), for example, the artist used a framed field of mud as a surface and scooped away bits of the earth to mold the current, fragmented map of Palestine in relief. Left over by this action was the dried, cracked outline of a pre-1948 map of Palestine. Similar to the dichotomous definition of *al-shataat*, Mansour’s fragmentation of the geography of Palestine is a reminder of its prior wholeness. The chapters’ internal sections are similarly organized around such structural thematics and do not necessarily align with a particular group of artists or defined historical moments. Sections with evocative titles, such as “The Open Mouth,” “Darkness Visible,” “The Wall,” and “Desire and the Alien Body,” assemble unexpected groupings of artworks, and the authors perform visual analysis while simultaneously formulating a constellation of conceptual tools by which to interpret Palestinian art.

The purposefully uneven structure of the text is balanced by Makhoul and Hon’s confident and vivid prose. From descriptive passages on artworks to meditations on the nature of Palestinian-ness, the authors engage the reader even as some of the “origins” they present are more convincing than others. They also manage to contribute a new roster of artists to the canon developed by Ankori and Boullata, despite being published less than a decade later—perhaps the most convincing confirmation of a rapid Palestinian art boom, in both the local and international contexts. This roster includes young artists, such as Raafat Hattab (b. 1981), Durar Bacri (b. 1982), and Jumana Manna (b. 1987) among others. Furthermore, their captivating readings of the works of Asad Azi and Khalil Rabah provide fresh interpretations that wrestle with the existing narratives by Ankori and Boullata. However, in interpreting Khalil Rabah’s institutional projects, like the much-lauded RIWAQ Biennale launched in 2005, the authors might have found a more interesting sparring partner in the anthropologist Chiara De Cesari. De Cesari claims Rabah uses a tactic of “anticipatory representation,” a practice of calling into being institutions that do not yet fully exist. This tactic bears resemblance to recent policies adopted by the Palestinian political establishment,

such as the bid for UN recognition, and Makhoul and Hon might have used this argument to add to their interpretation of Rabah and his work as a Lacanian “semblant,” a type of being and practice that depends upon a conscious use of make-believe to call out the impossibility of both the real thing it desires to be and its artificial, performative version (p. 234).

While a book of this type diversifies the field, Makhoul and Hon’s attachment to the idea of origins and their consequent release from the need to write a more chronological art history, is both this book’s strength and its weakness—or, to utilize the authors’ catchphrase about the image of Jerusalem in contemporary artistic practice, it is both the “navel and the blind spot” (p. 108). Tantalizing linear narratives lurk beneath the fragmented mosaic they portray. The superb section about the Israeli Communist Party (Maki), the importance of Communism to Palestinian artists of the liberation generation, and these artists’ position as mentors to the post-Oslo generation, produces a firework with no discernible spark. While the chapter on Palestinian artists working inside of Israel and Israeli cultural institutions (“Inside the Line: Palestinians in Israel”) is nuanced and invigorating, it leaves out a parallel critical discussion of how the recent development of Palestinian cultural institutions, such as Al-Ma’mal (est. 1998) and Al-Hoash (est. 2004) in Jerusalem, and the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center (est. 1996) and International Academy of Art Palestine (est. 2006) in Ramallah, have altered contemporary artistic practice. Dotting the text is also only an oblique consideration of the role of NGOs, international humanitarian aid foundations, as organizations that have sharply influenced the cultural sector and are substantial players in the post-Oslo field. But, perhaps this was the goal all along: by subverting the standard art historical process and harping on the origins of Palestinian art, all that is left to see is new beginnings.

Note

[1]. Gannit Ankori, *Palestinian Art* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 24.

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