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## Contrasting Colors

Ibrahim Nubani was resurrected from the depths of despair when he started painting again. But despite his artistic success and a new exhibition at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, he says he still feels like a refugee.

**Dalia Karpel**

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For about 10 years, artist Ibrahim Nubani was stuck in a kind of black hole that sucked him down into depression and a severe identity crisis. Drunk, or drugged by psychiatric medications, he walked around Tel Aviv barefoot. Finally, with no income, he was forced to return to his mother's home in the Galilee village of Maker. Now he seems to have come back to life, proof of which was this week's opening of his one-man show at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. The exhibition is a kind of cross-section of 20 years of creativity.

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"Faust said that if one has lost something, he can never get it back," says Nubani. "I don't know what coming back to life is, but I am capable of talking to you and drinking coffee with you and speaking like a human being."

In the early 1980s, Nubani left his village and went off to study architecture at the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. At least that is what he told his parents, who were insisting that he go into medicine or law. He actually enrolled in the art department, and was soon considered promising. In 1984, when he finished his studies as one of the outstanding students in his class, his career took off with a speed that surprised even him. In 1986 he was chosen to take part in a group exhibition in the Israeli pavilion at the Venice Biennale. He was only 25 years old.

In the catalogue, curator Yona Fisher wrote that Nubani's works contain two separate elements: "Organization of shapes, which is related to the tradition of Western painting and is studied in art academies, and color - related to the East." The two elements still exist in his work. "I found Nubani's painting good, and precise in terms of the subject, which was 'artists who deal with color,' says Fisher now. "His world looked interesting, and explosive. He mixed very Western colors with the Oriental colorfulness that we see in our region, and he was educated and read a lot. I admired him as an artist."

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Nubani says that not much has changed since then in the center of gravity of his work. "At the time, I took the avant-garde art of the 20th century, which in my opinion contains a large reservoir of raw material from which one can draw, and today I am still conducting a dialogue with modern art and with periods in the history of art that speak to me."

After the Venice Biennale, Nubani went to live in Tel Aviv. His work was displayed in

prestigious galleries and was well received. But soon came the fall, related to alcohol and unrequited love for a Jewish Israeli woman. Attacks of fury and violence led to hospitalization in psychiatric hospitals. Fisher recalls that during that period, Nubani came to the Tel Aviv Museum and demanded that they buy a painting from him, and pay in cash. "We were willing to help him, but he was in such a bad state that he was incapable of taking `no' for an answer, and he tore up the paintings. There was something threatening and aggressive in his demands."

Nubani says the Tel Aviv art community, which embraced him during his years of success, ignored him during those difficult times. He left Tel Aviv in 1991, and says he didn't touch a paintbrush for six years. "I didn't have the conditions to paint. I drew occasionally, but I thought about art all the time." In 1997 he decided to fight for his life, rented a space in an industrial building in his village, shut himself up and painted. In the village, he says, they were sure that he was working in the industrial area as a night watchman.

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This week in the Tel Aviv Museum, against a backdrop of huge, powerful canvases (2 x 2 meters), Nubani was chain smoking and sounded sharp and concentrated, even when he seemed hesitant. "Painting is an existential need for me," he says. "I do everything while I'm painting, prepare food and paint, eat and paint, I brush my teeth while I'm washing my paintbrushes in the sink."

**I'm a refugee**

"Life here as a Palestinian painter is an experience of great pain," says Nubani, standing in front of one of the paintings in the exhibition. "Untitled" is divided into three parts - the lower part presents reality, he says, and reality in the painting looks like an area that has been "exposed," demolished by Israel Defense Forces bulldozers. "One day I was sitting in the hills in the Galilee near Acre, and everything around there has been confiscated, and IDF bases are multiplying all over the place, and we the Arabs are a kind of enclave, and Kafr Maqr looks like a closed work camp. On the canvas, I look for the blue color and the hill, and I can't find it, because Palestine no longer exists. It has been placed in storage and stolen by Zionism."

What was the genesis of a painting like this?

"Before I begin painting, I am totally rational. But when I begin to work, I allow what is happening at the time of the painting to dominate me beyond the rationale that I used beforehand. I don't see a certain image in my head before I begin to paint, I think abstractly, and during the course of the work certain figures and shapes take shape in my consciousness. I never make sketches. I begin to work directly on the canvas.

"For me, beginning a painting almost always [arises from] a need to take a new canvas. In effect, I create a new painting because something is missing in the previous work. I don't do it consciously, I simply take a canvas and work, but the moment I take the canvas, all the artistic questions reawaken. I almost never copy a previous work, or an idea that I had previously. I don't repeat a motif. I like to ask questions about art in every painting. I like to interest myself."

The largest work in the exhibit was yet to be hung when this conversation took place last week. It is an architectural structure made of modular pieces of wood, rectangles and squares, which was influenced by Bauhaus ideas and by artists such as Mondrian and Frank Stella. Into these modernistic, Western influences, Nubani has introduced the Orientalism of the Arab villages: colorful houses with domes. The result is somewhat reminiscent of Lego blocks.

One of the strongest paintings in the exhibit is called "The Sun," a triptych inspired by Miro's paintings. In the center is an orange sun, sexy but aggressive as well, and not far from it, a skull and the frightened face of a Palestinian boy can be seen. "I use Miro and artistic language as a refuge on the one hand, and on the other hand, it's as though I'm taking Miro and turning him into a child in a refugee camp in Palestine," Nubani tries to explain.

The exhibit is called "Intermediate Space." Nubani wanted to call it "Outside the Camp," in order to express his feelings. "I'm a citizen of the place, I ostensibly have rights over about 20 percent of the space here," he says. "For me, whether I exhibit in the village or exhibit in the Tel Aviv Museum, it's the same life. I am a refugee and will remain a refugee. After all, I was cut off from society and from art after that crisis, which turned out to be a nightmare that shattered on the altar of extremist Zionist ideology. The word that most shocks me today is the word 'separation,' and I was astonished that the left supported it and signed a declaration of support for it and for the fence. Now I know that no peace is possible between Zionism and the Palestinians, because almost everything in the Zionist state exists at the expense of the Palestinian people."

Then why are you exhibiting in the Tel Aviv Museum?

"In order to say that, and in order to have it written in the newspaper. Because I deserve to be part of things here, in spite of my opinions. During the period when I was cut off from Israeli art, I turned to Palestinian society, and I wanted them to adopt me as an artist. But I create modern contemporary art, and that's somewhat problematic for people from the village, who struggle for pennies in order to support their children."

## **Early days**

Nubani was born in Acre in 1961, and grew up in Kafr Maqr, the second of six children. His father, Omar Nubani, was born in 1907 in the village of Mizra al-Nubani in the Nablus region, and at the age of 18 moved to Haifa. In April 1948, after

the capture of the city, he fled to Acre. His wife, Waqia, whom he married in 1957, was a 7-year-old child when the soldiers of the Carmeli Brigade attacked her native village (today Kibbutz Beit Ha'emek) in the western Galilee in July 1948. The Muslim residents fled, and some found refuge in the Druze village of Yarka.

"Druze hid my family," says Ibrahim Nubani. "Afterward, they went to Kafr Maqr and lived for two years under a tree, until they found a solution. For years, the family had no electricity. I know that Israelis don't like to hear that in 1948 ethnic cleansing took place, but we are holocaust survivors as you are Holocaust survivors. My mother's anxieties continue to this day. She hasn't told us everything, and it's hard to get her to tell the details. Sometimes she tells something. I don't know why her village was destroyed and Maker remained, but I when I was growing up, being a refugee was part of my life."

Omar Nubani was 50 years old when he married the young Waqia in an arranged match. Their eldest son works as a laborer. After him came Ibrahim, and then another son, who is a barber. Two daughters are married and raising children, and the youngest son, about 30, is a gifted musician who makes a living by teaching math. "Our being refugees affected us," says Ibrahim Nubani. "I also grew up without a hamula [extended family], in other words without uncles and relatives. What keeps me in the village today is the connection with my mother. She is chronically ill, and I am close to her.

"Ever since I can remember, I've been drawn to art," he says. "I used to go to caves and bring stones and make sculptures out of them. At the age of 7, I already bought large sketchbooks, and I was attracted to every painting I saw. Was I born an artist? That's a difficult question, and I can give a somewhat mystical answer. When I was in 10th grade, I wrote in my diary: 'Ibrahim Nubani, the best artist in the world.' I don't know to what extent it depends on me. Shakespeare said that some are born to greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them. I don't know which one I am. I'm very hard on myself. I'm my own worst enemy."

Nubani studied in the elementary school in his village and went to the Kafr Yassif

high school. The family was poor, and his father earned a living as a maintenance man in the Kafr Maqr school. "We enlarged the house with the help of neighbors, and I got a room that I filled with symbolic landscape paintings. Father took me to an artist in Acre who taught me how to draw. When I was in 10th grade I used to travel twice a week to study still life with Abed Abadi, a painter who studied art in Eastern Europe."

Last week, Abadi recalled the exceptional boy. "He was very gentle and restrained, and capable of creating a dialogue, and I remember that he used to come with his gifted younger brother, who studied music," says Abadi. "His worldview was close to mine, and only a little removed in terms of implementation. He used atypical means of expression. For example, he used delicate or rigid outlines in a composition that was already then planned more emotionally than visually. He didn't draw pitchers in order to draw pitchers, but in order to express his musicality. I identified him as an exceptional student who had an artistic future."

Nubani completed high school with high grades, and received a bagrut matriculation certificate. "I'm still a good boy," he says. "I was a solitary child, but not lonely. I was loved by my parents. I was creative and independent, and I loved to plant trees and water them, and to feed the sheep. When father worked as a maintenance man in the school, my greatest pleasure was when we finished cleaning. I used to run to the library with a feeling that all the books were mine. I read a great deal."

## **A broken guitar**

This happy childhood also includes a traumatic story. "As long as I can remember, I wanted to be a painter," says Nubani. "But if I envy other artists, it's only musicians. When I was a child, I dreamt of playing the guitar. It was clear that they wouldn't buy me one, because we had no money, and in the conditions of an agricultural society, art and music are of no value. I understood that if I wanted a guitar I had to build it by myself. It took me about a year, and at the age of 10 I had a very sophisticated guitar. One day my mother asked me to do something in the house. I was a child who helped with everything, but at that moment, I said no. She took a hammer and broke

the guitar into pieces.

Did you cry?

"I didn't cry in her presence, because I was supposed to be a man, but inside I cried for a long time. Now I understand that she was overcome by her refugee mentality and her anxieties. A lack of understanding caused her to break the guitar.

Paradoxically, I became familiar with those feelings when I lived in Tel Aviv and strong ties that I had with people from Israeli society were severed. I'm not comparing one disaster to another, but in 1991, Israeli society threw me back to the village, which isn't artistic territory. I never built another guitar, but recently I bought a small child's guitar, the size of that one."

After he completed high school, his parents wanted him to study medicine or law, but he sat at home for a year, painting and writing poems. "I fell in love with a girl from the village, and she married someone else," he explains. He reveals that even today he writes "lyrical prose about love of Palestine."

At the end of a year of mourning for his lost love, Nubani saw a notice in the paper about registration for the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem. For the entrance exams he presented two of his paintings, and was accepted.

When he first moved to Tel Aviv, in 1986, he lived in the north of the city, at the home of a young American woman. "She admired my work and supported me so I could paint." He worked for a living at silk-screen printing, and later at an advertising firm, moving to a rented apartment on Herzl Street. "I lacked for nothing. I had a social life, and I dated girls from the city and went to bars, etc."

He says he remained in contact with his family, but was quite cut off from the village because he was drawn into Tel Aviv's cultural life - "cultural life that I call imaginary. There's a great distance between the general and the personal. I was accepted in Tel Aviv until the high point, which was the encounter with the girl. When the first intifada broke out in 1987, we were already together, and I was deep into my success



as an artist. For two years I denied the intifada and continued to hide behind our love story and behind life in Tel Aviv, and I thought that I could continue to live like that."

It's hard to reconstruct the story of his deterioration. Nubani says it began when the relationship with his Tel Aviv girlfriend ended. "She was the last person to abandon me before my breakdown, and I'm not sure that she's to blame," says Nubani. "I couldn't accept the fact that she wouldn't be with me. But I'm not the one to blame for what happened to me. I wasn't aware of the laws of the state, which consumes politics the way one consumes cottage cheese. Only today, with all the pain, do I understand that Israeli culture doesn't nurture Palestinian artists, it nurtures its own artists. I understood that I don't belong, that I'm a provisional guest."

Before leaving the village and going to study in Jerusalem, his father advised him that in every new place, he should find one friend. "I understood that in the opposite way," says Nubani. "When I had a breakdown, all of Tel Aviv knew that Nubani was almost finished, but nobody knew what I was going through inside. I was diagnosed by the doctors as having suffered a schizophrenic attack. I couldn't integrate into reality. The illusion that I was born in Israel as a member of a minority but also as an equal citizen who could attain anything he wanted, had been shattered.

"I found myself in a situation where I had nowhere to go. I could have returned to my mother's home, which is a kind of prison for someone who had been identified as a big star with his future before him. Instead of finding myself and developing as an artist, I had to find myself as a Palestinian Arab. That's what the situation dictated. Had I known myself better, I should have anticipated the crisis, or at least controlled it. On the other hand, I have no complaints against the system, because I was displayed at the Biennale, and in galleries, and I was respected as an artist."

In the wake of the emotional crisis came financial hardship. He had no money to pay the rent, and for a while he lived in the street. "I reached a situation where police arrested me on Sheinkin Street [in Tel Aviv]. 'Get into the van,' they said, and took me to Abarbanel [a psychiatric hospital in Bat Yam]. In the hospital I was treated like

a crazy Arab who had come from Jaffa, and who also painted. I didn't get the treatment I deserved as an educated and enlightened artist."

For several years he was in and out of psychiatric hospitals. When he came out, he had nowhere to live. "That was a period of wandering between Tel Aviv parks and hospitals. Many people saw me like that and said 'It breaks my heart.' I'm sorry to say this, but I don't know what friends are. Even the girl who was my girlfriend was afraid of me. One day I saw her on Sheinkin. When she ignored me, I approached her and threatened her. She filed a complaint with the police, and I was in Abu Kabir prison for about a month. Afterward, I was hospitalized again. When I took an extra slice of cake from the tray without asking permission, the male nurse, who was of Mizrahi origin [referring to Jews of North African or Middle Eastern descent], he tied me to the bed, and for three days I received injections."

In the end, for lack of choice, he returned to his mother's home. "In the village, they didn't want me to paint," he says. "It was as though the breaking of the guitar during my childhood was repeating itself. For a few years I lived in my mother's house, cut off from a life of art, from books, cinema or music, from the natural life of an artist. For three years I talked to the walls."

Painting saved him, Nubani says. "Freud said he couldn't cure the patient of his suffering, he could only make things easier for him. I always feel dissatisfied, I'm always lacking something, there's always something wrong. I'm a strong man who has seen harsh things, but my conclusion was to stick to painting even more. I thought that if I had ended up in such a crisis - life in the street, separation from a girl I loved and a lack of hope - I had to paint. In 1997 I bought canvases and paints and rented a space in the commercial area of the village."

What have you been living on since then?

"I live frugally. In those years, starting in 1998, I would occasionally take a painting and take a taxi or a bus - depending on the size of the painting - and travel to Tel Aviv, to the publisher of Haaretz, Amos Schocken, who is an admirable man,

although he doesn't like being praised. I used to come with a picture and he would buy it. There's a Palestinian lawyer, Mazen Copti, who also bought works from me, and that's how I survived."

### **An Arab who paints**

Even now, with his exhibition at the museum, Nubani insists on returning to the lesson he learned during his bad period. "I understood that instead of relating to you and to your art, they relate to the fact that an Arab paints," he says. "Although I was presented as a star and a promising artist, this promise didn't withstand any test. I fell, and for 10 years nobody turned to me in connection with any exhibit that took place in Israel, not even a group exhibit on a particular subject. They said, 'Ibrahim has gone crazy.' As though there are no other artists in Israel who were in a bad emotional state at some point in their lives. It was easy to erase me."

He is convinced that the reasons for the alienation of the artistic establishment are related to his political views, which were expressed in his work. "I didn't want to paint the uprooted person in his land, like [the late Palestinian-Israeli painter] Asim Abu Shakra, who painted the sabra cactus plant after uprooting it from the ground and putting it into a vase. I didn't cry in my art. They wanted me to cry, whereas I threatened them with the viewpoints I represented and with my demand to be equal to them. But even an Arab artist like Abu Shakra - would the Tel Aviv museum have put on a comprehensive exhibition of his work if he weren't dead?"

Nubani is unwilling to forgive the museum that is now hosting him. "Before my show, there was an exhibition here in the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion called 'Living on the Sands,' which claimed that Tel Aviv was all sand before the Zionist pioneers built it. As though there had been no series of Arab villages there, such as Sheikh Munis, Summail, Jammassin, Jarisha, Salameh. After all, the denial is still going on. For example, the exhibition 'Point of View,' which was on display at the museum until the end of July, didn't display a single Arab artist."

Prof. Mordechai Omer, director of the Tel Aviv Museum, remembers Nubani from a

course on the history of art that he taught at Bezalel in the 1980s, when Nubani was a student there. "He slept during most of the lessons, which took place in the dark, with the only light coming from the slide projector," says Omer. During the past year, Omer traveled to Nubani's studio twice. He says that the "harsh remoteness" of the artist shocked him.

It turns out that Nubani has a small personal account to settle with Omer as well. He says that already in 2000, he showed Omer new works, and Omer promised to mount an exhibition of his work. The promise, says Nubani, was not fulfilled, until one day Amos Schocken and Omer came on a visit to his studio in Kafr Maker. After that, Omer decided to promote the exhibition. Omer has a somewhat different version. He confirms that he spoke to Nubani about the possibility of organizing an exhibit of his works, but says that it wasn't a promise.

"It's not due to Schocken's intervention that Nubani is being shown in the Tel Aviv Museum at present," says Omer. "At the time, I came on my own initiative to see works by young artists in the Schocken collection, and I saw on the list that there were works by Nubani. I asked the curator of the collection, Efrat Livni, if I could see them, and she showed me a number of his works, which were good, and that [impelled me] to speed up the exhibition of his works."

In order to shorten the process, Omer chose Livni, (who up to that time had curated only one exhibition, "Inner Sanctum," at the Herzliya Museum of Art) to curate the exhibit. "I know that the choice of Livni looks a little like incest," he says, "but there was a problem of learning the Nubani material, and she was more than expert in it."

Nubani continues to confront himself and his surroundings. "In the midst of all the mess of the conflict between the two nations, you ask yourself who you are and what you are supposed to be," he says. "I'm not a leader. I'm an artist and an individualist. I am Ibrahim Nubani. My identity is torn, and I don't know what it is. So I have to reflect on what is left of me, and I know that I have to focus on myself and on my work."

Recently he has been spending a lot of time in Ramallah, where he teaches young artists and students. This week he gave them all invitations to the opening of his exhibition, but he knew there was no chance that they would be allowed to cross the checkpoint, and he doesn't want to intervene on their behalf. "They're not a herd of animals that I'm going to release from quarantine," he explains.

He is thinking of moving to Ramallah, where he feels that he can live and feel at peace with himself. "It's an act of protest, and it's also my world of identification," he says. "I don't see my future with a Zionist state that causes injustice. I'm a humanist first of all, and remaining in Israel means giving up my values. I have decided to link my fate to the Palestinian people. With my views, I feel alien in Kafr Maqr, and it's easiest for me to connect to my people in the territories."

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