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Cracked and Shrinking Maps: An Interview with Palestinian Artist Suleiman Mansour



"The Bearer of Burdens" painting by Suleiman Mansour

Suleiman Mansour is one of Palestine's most renowned painters. Active in the Palestinian artist community since the 1970s, he has contributed greatly to art education and promotion in the West Bank. He is a co-founder of the Wasiti Art Center in Jerusalem, and is also a member of the "New Vision" artist group, which focuses on the use of local material in artwork.

On the eve of the 60th anniversary of the Palestinian Nakba in 2008, Suleiman Mansour was interviewed at the Palestinian International Academy of Art in Ramallah about the struggles of Palestinian cultural producers over the decades, and what the significance of art is in the face of this historic milestone.

Interview by Aaron Lakoff

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<http://www.radio4all.net/index.php/program/37184>

Suleiman Mansour: My name is Suleiman Mansour, I was born in Birzeit, which is a little bit north of Ramallah, in 1947. I had a big role in establishing a Palestinian artist movement in the occupied territories. I was the first head of that League in 1979, and again in 1986 and during the first Intifada. I was the head of the artist union during the first Intifada. I also helped to establish many artistic institutions in the Occupied Territories, including the University Art Centre in East Jerusalem, and the academy, the International Academy in Ramallah, and some museums here and there. I was the co-author of several books, mainly about Palestinian customs and Palestinian handicrafts.

Aaron Lakoff: So can you maybe talk a little bit about what you see as the relationship between art and, let's say the Intifada, or the popular uprising in Palestine and what is the importance of art in Palestine as we know it today.

S: The importance of art, for Palestinians, is a kind of a unique relationship, because art helped and is still helping a kind of revival of Palestinian identity. And through art we helped in creating that. So when we started working our main aim was to make images of the land, of the people working in the land. It's like calling for the people to go back to the land and take care of it. Also creating symbols for Palestinian identity through art.

You know there was an effort from many people and from many states to end the Palestinian identity and to dissolve the Palestinians in the region. So this was an important thing that we were doing of course with poets, with theater people, with musicians, with folk people also, dancers as well. So our work was mainly directed towards land, working in the land, Palestinian heritage, also Arabic culture, Islamic culture, culture from old times... Canan Knights, the Egyptians, the Syrians, you know all of these things entered into our art.

Until the first Intifada we were painting mostly paintings on these subjects. During the first months of the [first] Intifada, there was a kind of a call for to boycott Israeli products, for everybody. So as artists, we said "why don't we do the same?" And we started searching for natural materials to work with. Some artists went towards leather and henna and these things, others towards wood and burning wood and so on. Others trying to create or make natural dyes from fruits, from vegetables.

A: Because before that, were a lot of the arts supplies that people were buying Israeli products?

S: Of course. From oil to canvas to whatever you need you buy it from Israel. And I went towards mud, towards material of the land, soil and mud. I worked for a long time in that medium, trying to create images from the land, from the material of the land which is the mud. Of course this effected a lot Palestinian art in general, and all artists were experimenting and trying to do new things. So the effect of the first Intifada was very important to Palestinian art.

A: So what about today, 2008. Unfortunately the Israeli occupation is ongoing. What would you say is the state of cultural life and art in Palestine. Would you say that there is a strong artistic community? What are some of the challenges to Palestinian artists?

S: There is a lot of Palestinian artists, even young woman artists. There are a lot of artists now working and working in different mediums like photography, video, and installations. Many in conceptual art. Most of the art that is done by Palestinian artists in the Occupied Territories is directed towards the situation here, and the occupation and the wall and the checkpoints, and everything that makes people angry. Of course the art brings this out. We never had a Palestinian art academy because during the Occupation it was forbidden for Palestinians to make two academic institutions. One was an agricultural institution and the other was an art academy. So you can see how they think, you know, the land is not yours, and you shouldn't express whatever happens to you.

A: I understand as well that much of your art touches on themes of the Palestinian Nakba, issues of the refugees, right of return for refugees. This year is the 60 year anniversary of Al Nakba. What is the significance

of this year for you as an artist?

S: Of course it is a very sad year, and because I am optimistic in a way and I thought that in 1994 everything was going to be solved and we would have our own state. But still we are under occupation and it is even more evil now... So it is a very sad occasion to me because what we are living now is a continuation of the Nakba, and whatever I do, it could be related to Al Nakba. Of course the refugee problem is very important. It comes out every now and then, in this occasion and other occasions always there is the image of the refugee in our works and in my work.

A: Speaking of the wall, I just saw one of your pieces in this catalog here and I'm wondering if you could describe that piece for me with the painting on the wall?

S: I started this type of painting, but I didn't finish it. You know they were putting the wall, they used to put pieces and then remove it again, so I started working on this piece which represents the hands of Adam and God as Michelangelo did it. But of course I separated the hands, I made a big space between the two hands. But then they took the pieces and I couldn't finish the painting.

A: So I guess now those hands were moved even farther apart...

S: Yes.



Painting on the apartheid wall near Ramallah by Suleiman Mansour

A: Can you show me maybe one or two other pieces in here that are important to you and just kind of describe their significance?

S: This map here, I did it on, with rust on metal, and it shows Palestine as I see it. I put many cities, not necessarily from Palestine, like San Francisco, Sao Paulo, places wherever there is a Palestinian refugee, I put that city in the Palestinian map. Such works like landscapes of olive trees also are important for me and also they represent for the Palestinians their land which the Israelis are eating bit by bit. Orange groves also represent the lost homeland, which is Jaffa and the coastal plain. So when you see a painting with oranges it symbolizes the lost homeland, when you see a painting with olive trees, it represents what is left of Palestine now.

Now this work it shows the map of Palestine, I cut it out of wood, and then I put mud inside the shape that I cut up and I let it dry, and when it dried it kept the shape of Palestine but it shrank. And I believe this is also a metaphor for the situation here where the idea of Palestine is shrinking among the minds of people and it is becoming cracked.

A: Can you discuss some of the problems and difficulties that Palestinian artists face under the occupation?

S: One of our main problems that we faced when we started working in '75 was a lack of places where we could show our work. Because in many places there were no electricity, and halls were not prepared to show our works. So we decided to print our works as posters and postcards to distribute it to the people as much as we can. And immediately we got ourselves in trouble with the Israeli authorities because they started confiscating these posters and postcards. They were finding people who were distributing them. Then they started coming to the exhibitions and confiscating paintings that they don't like.

In 1981 they closed an exhibition that I did. It lasted 6 hours, and they took me to the police station, me and another two friends, and they told us that we are not allowed to use red green black and white in our works. And so every painting that was done with these colors in it could be confiscated. So many artworks were confiscated because all artists started working in red green black and white.

I was in prison at that time for several times, short periods, like 40 days each time, and I was forbidden to travel from the country for several years. Many of the artists also were imprisoned for longer periods and many of their works were confiscated. Of course as I said we were forbidden to establish art institutions because they always put a veto on that. And also because we are closed we lived in a kind of ghetto so we couldn't have any kind of communication with our Arab colleagues as artists. Also at the time there wasn't the internet. So we were living actually like in a ghetto. It was very hard and it went on until the early 90's, until the Oslo agreement, and then it became more easy for artists to work and to exhibit.

A: Why do you think the Israelis would do such a thing as that? Why was art perceived as such a threat to Israelis?

S: Because as I said, with other artists we were trying to revive and to strengthen Palestinian identity. And of course we showed a lot of works that are anti-occupation, anti-soldier, anti-military. And because they are military, they do not like this. I am talking about the military government in the West Bank. I don't know about the Israeli government policy towards art but the military government in the West Bank was against art totally, and it was angry whenever there is an exhibition and soldiers come in. Of course there was no art critics among the soldiers and every soldier, if he didn't like a painting, he could take it and it is according to his political agenda and so on. So it was a mess actually, because we didn't know what to show and what to paint. But there was a kind of confrontation always between artists and soldiers.

A: So the last question I wanted to ask was, with places like this, the Palestine International Arts Academy that you've established, and other artistic institutions, what is your hope for the future with the Palestinian arts and Palestinian artists?

S: Of course my hope is to have a very strong and active art movement in Palestine. I would love very much to see the Palestinian community understand and appreciate and buy art from artists and I would like to see many institutions, not only academies but museums, galleries, because this is all important for art. But the main thing is a kind of developed community to understand art and to appreciate it and to support artists.

-->For more information on the International Academy of Art in Palestine, visit:

www.artacademy.ps

Transcribed by Katie Earle

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