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Art imitates life in Gaza

By **Alan Johnston**
BBC correspondent in Gaza

A young Palestinian artist is reaching a wider audience with his paintings inspired by the conflict in the Gaza Strip.



Palestinian artists have reflected the conflict in their work.

Around the world the image of the Gaza Strip could hardly be worse.

Think of Gaza and you think of furious funeral crowds seething around the coffins of assassinated Hamas leaders.

You think of Palestinian families fleeing as bulldozers destroy their homes. Or perhaps you think of young men calmly announcing in a last video message that they intend to launch a suicidal attack on Israel.

Psychiatrists report that nearly a quarter of all teenagers say they would like to die in the Palestinian struggle.

But while many young people feel that Israel must be confronted, by no means all believe that violence is the only option.

May was one of the bloodiest months that Gaza has endured since the current Palestinian uprising began.

In the Rafah refugee camp alone Israeli forces killed more than 60 people. Many families had their homes bulldozed.

As they moved through the alleyways the soldiers will have been focused only on their hunt for the gunmen from militant groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad, some of Israel's most deadly and implacable enemies.

Drama

But a young Palestinian modern artist called Hazem Harb saw something quite different in the images emerging from Rafah.

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The BBC's Alan Johnston

"Palestinian suffering is Hazem's subject"

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So he put on the slow, sad music from Egypt that he likes and began to paint.

"I picked up my brush and dark colours, and I worked in the moment when it was all happening, so the lines were sharp and there is drama in the pictures.



Hazem's work is being displayed in France.

"The suffering in Rafah was terrible."

Hazem produced a series of female nudes. Some are pregnant, and all of them are mutilated. It seemed that their heads have been hacked from their soft, curving bodies.

For Hazem, they capture the vulnerability of the people of Rafah, and what he described as the barbarity that they were being subjected to.

Themes

All of Hazem's work is steeped in the Palestinian struggle that was always the backdrop to his life as he grew up in one of the poorer parts of Gaza City.

"To be a Palestinian is to be part of the conflict," says 24-year-old Hazem.

"In my work there is conflict, and there is the misery of our lives which is what creates the conflict.

"And all that you see in my work emphasises the pain that is everywhere. "

His abstract work is often suffused with a sense of loss and hopelessness - as in the ghostly figures of refugee women who seem to wear their veils more like shrouds.



To be a Palestinian is to be part of the conflict, says Hazem.

Broken ladders suggesting the impossibility of escape are a recurring theme. And perhaps most powerful are a series of oval faces drained of life and desperately weary.

Confrontation

Hazem's talent is beginning to be recognised abroad.

An exhibition of his work opens next month at the Institute of the Arab World in Paris. It will be Hazem's second show in France this year. His work has already toured Italy.

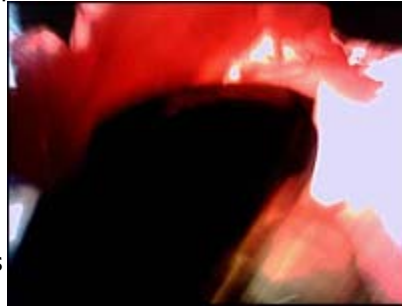
Fighters and suicide bombers have become powerful role models in Palestinian society. A lot of young people see violence as the only option in the confrontation with Israel.

But Hazem Harb has chosen a more subtle approach.

He's waging a battle of ideas in places far removed from the barricades of Gaza.

"I'm proving that there is a Palestinian culture, that there is a Palestinian creativity," he says.

"We're not only living in conflict and war. We have a lot of things to offer just as other nations offer themselves to the world."



His abstract work is often suffused with a sense of loss.

Hazem's work is certainly filled with a huge sensitivity for the suffering of his people.

But how does he react emotionally to Israeli suffering at the hands of suicide bombers - might the pain on that side of the divide ever be reflected in his work?

He replies that he hated to see blood whatever its nationality. But he adds: "I can't work on the miseries of the Israelis because I don't feel their situation."

"I'm working on our misery, our suffering. I'm living in a dangerous place - a daily war."

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