

ARTS | SPECIAL REPORT: MUSEUMS

Dialogue by Way of Art in Israel

By ARIEL DAVID MARCH 22, 2011

UMM EL-FAHEM — It won't last more than two months. That's what Said Abu Shakra was told when he founded a gallery dedicated to Arab and Palestinian art in this impoverished northern Israeli town.

Fifteen years later, not only is the space thriving, but Mr. Abu Shakra also feels he has a shot at realizing his dream: building a spectacular museum to showcase his culture's heritage and contemporary talent. In January, he was honored at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, where politicians, diplomats and other dignitaries gathered funds for the permanent collection of the planned museum.

The project, the Umm el-Fahem Museum of Contemporary Art, is just one among the many developments in a trend that is quietly taking shape in Israel. While political negotiations for peace in the Middle East have all but stalled, Israelis are slowly discovering Palestinian art, helping build ties and encourage dialogue between the two peoples.

Israeli museums are increasingly showing works by Israeli Arabs and Palestinians; private galleries focusing on these artists have sprung up; and collectors and researchers are showing more interest, along with the public at large.

“There was a time when Jewish society had difficulty accepting Palestinian Israelis as Palestinians, with their history, their traditions and society,” said Ellen Ginton, senior curator of Israeli art at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art. But that attitude is starting to change.

Since Mr. Abu Shakra established his gallery, similar spaces have been created, by Arabs and Jews, from Nazareth to Tel Aviv. Major museums and institutions are also catching up.

In 2008, the L.A. Mayer Museum of Islamic Art in Jerusalem could claim it was the first Israeli museum to host a group exhibition of contemporary Israeli Arab artists.

Now, at places like the Tel Aviv museum, events involving Arab artists are scheduled almost back to back. On display until June 4 are three young artists including Dor Guez, whose work reflects and explores his mixed Israeli-Palestinian heritage. From December to March 2012, the museum will show the Palestinian landscapes of Walid Abu Shakra, Said’s older brother, and then from March to June 2012 it will hold an exhibition of Michael Halak, whose haunting self-portraits investigate the identity of Palestinians living in Israel. Ms. Ginton said the museum hopes to acquire many of the works on display.

The Israeli government now also helps finance projects in the Arab sector, including the Umm el-Fahem gallery, and even the National Lottery has a program to print catalogs and support exhibitions by artists from this community.

“When it gets to the lottery, the process is complete — it has gone from the margins to the mainstream,” said Rona Sela, a researcher and curator of historical Israeli and Palestinian photography, whose work focuses on how images from each culture are used to build perceptions and views of the other.

Israel’s rising interest in Palestinian art has various causes, she said: from the art world’s thirst for “the next big thing” to a genuine desire to understand the other side in the protracted Mideast conflict. She added that Israelis like her who bring Palestinian culture to a Jewish public also hold strong political motivations.

“I do my work as a vehicle for change,” she said. “I want Israelis to learn Palestinian history, which they don’t study in school.”

Similar sentiments drove Amir Neuman Ahuvia and Yair Rothman, who a year ago established the Jaffa Salon of Palestinian Art in Tel Aviv. It started out as a temporary exhibition, but its success turned it into a fixture of the city’s art scene.

The gallery, located in a former warehouse of the ancient port of Jaffa, offers a broad look at Palestinian contemporary art. Most works have a political subtext and offer scathing criticism of Israeli policies, though often not as overtly as many visitors expect. There are strong statements, like the warplanes recognizable in the abstract, Miró-like paintings of Dina Matar, a young artist from Gaza; but also the nostalgic and melancholic images of refugees and landscapes by the veteran artist Ahmad Canaan, who acts as curator for the display.

“People are very surprised,” Mr. Neuman Ahuvia said. “They ask, ‘Where are the bombs and the Kalashnikovs?’ They expect something more political and instead they see landscapes.”

Israeli collectors are snapping up Palestinian works, also because prices are relatively low compared with booming art from Egypt, Syria and other Arab countries, Mr. Rothman said. Depending on the size and author of the work, prices at the salon range from \$500 to \$10,000.

“Prices have already tripled in the last three, four years,” Mr. Rothman said, “but there is still room for an increase.”

This growing success is pushing more Israeli Arabs and Palestinians to become artists, a path once shunned in their society, and to connect with Israeli institutions.

“The cultural situation used to be almost zero in the Arab community: no cinema, no theater, no galleries,” said Mr. Abu Shakra, the founder of the Umm el-Fahem Art Gallery. “Responsibility can be divided equally: Israel didn’t do anything for us, but we, too, didn’t do anything for ourselves.”

That's why, in 1996, Mr. Abu Shakra, an art school graduate and painter, established his gallery in the heart of this working-class Arab town of 45,000 just north of the West Bank. For many Israelis, the place remains at best a quaint town worth a stop, and at worse a flash point where tensions with the country's Arab minority sometimes flare into violent clashes. (In October, Jewish activists staged a march here, leading to scuffles between residents and police officers escorting the demonstration.)

Mr. Abu Shakra, 54, has been working to reposition his hometown as a meeting point for two cultures.

"Jews shouldn't stay away out of fear," he said, speaking in Hebrew. "We want them to come to see our art and culture."

For more than five years he kept his day job as a police officer in Jerusalem and used the bus commute to write invitations and organize exhibitions by cellphone. The gallery features anything from retrospectives on local artists like Sharif Waked and Abed Abdi to international events like a Yoko Ono show that drew thousands in 1999, an annual ceramics symposium and a 2009 joint exhibition of German, Jewish and Palestinian artists.

Now Mr. Abu Shakra proudly shows visitors of his gallery the projects for the planned museum. Designed by the Israeli architect Amnon Bar Or, it is an imposing rectangular block that would be visible from afar, covered in latticework that spells out Arabic words. More than half of the five-story museum would host Arab and Palestinian contemporary art, along with the Umm el-Fahem archive, a collection of photos, documents and interviews about the town's history. There would also be space for international artists and works by Jewish Israelis, much as in the existing gallery.

Though Mr. Abu Shakra says he is in contact with Jewish and Arab investors, and building permits are being sought, he has set no date for the opening of the museum and acknowledges that it will take years for his dream to come true.

"I can't imagine building it without the help of both communities," he said.

“The goal is not just to build the museum; it’s to do it together.”

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