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An artistic 'road map' to progress

In a Palestinian art show in Houston, some see a promise beyond pictures

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HOUSTON

After a gruesome week of bloodshed, fractured road maps, and sputtering hopes for peace in the Middle East, another vision of Palestine and its people is drawing a steady stream of visitors to a small Houston art museum.

It can be seen in the clay olive trees of Vera Tamari, the pricked plastic hearts of Ashraf Fawakhry, and the empty gauze dresses of Mary Tuma. Their work shows Palestine not just as a place of war, but as a culture with a long history and complex character. The three are among 22 Palestinian artists whose work has traveled thousands of miles to be collected in the first museum exhibition in the United States devoted to contemporary Palestinian art.

Remarkably, in this time of heated rhetoric and heightened violence, the exhibit "Made in Palestine," has passed almost without notice or concern in Houston's varied Jewish community. But it has caused a stir among Arab-Americans nationwide as calls keep coming in to take the show on the road once its stay in Houston ends this October.

The reason, say Middle East experts, has more to do with culture than politics. Without an accurate and complete portrait of the people involved, they say, it will be difficult to bring peace to the region.

"Unfortunately, the only images Americans get are of the everyday conflict," says Azar Nafisi, a former English professor at the University of Tehran, now a visiting professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. "The whole region is seen from a political perspective."

If the values and feelings of those involved are better understood, says Dr. Nafisi, that will make dialogue easier. "And one of the best ways to understand people is through their art and literature. It shows them in more humane terms - as living, breathing people who fall in and out of love."

While this Palestinian art exhibit does have political overtones, it is meant to be more an expression of cultural identity. Through a mix of painting, photography, sculpture, textiles, and video, the artists sow tales of love and loss. They speak of struggle and success. But probably most important, they offer hope for the future.

Vera Tamari is one artist who still sees light in darkness. For years, she clipped newspaper articles about the destruction of ancient olive trees near her native home of Birzeit in the West Bank. Then one day, she took handfuls of colorful clay and began to reconstruct those trees. The result is about 600 ceramic trees standing on a Plexiglas base with a fuzzy photo of a 1,000-year-old olive tree looking down on its lost companions.

"Olive trees are part of the rhythm of life in Palestine," says Ms. Tamari. "But since the occupation, they are being cut down to punish the people, to break down our attachment to the land." By rebuilding the trees with colorful clay, she wanted to show that hope is not lost.

Getting the art - and artists - out of the region and to the museum, The Station, was no small task. Two museum staff members were detained trying to enter the occupied territories - and explanations of who they were and what they were after weren't convincing. "You should have seen us trying to introduce ourselves to the artists," says James Harithas, former director of Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum and now the Station's director. " 'Hi. We're from Houston, Texas, and we want to put on a big show.' We had to really make our case."

Back in the US, there was one roadblock after another, from transportation of the art to obtaining travel visas for the artists. In the end, only 10 artists received visas and made it to the opening - an event with its own suspense.

"We didn't have the faintest idea if anybody would show up," says Mr. Harithas, who often raises eyebrows around town for his avant-garde, even shocking shows. One exhibit, "Secret Wars," explored artistic dissent to covert operations

and government secrets a week after 9/11. That prompted an FBI visit for perceived "un-American activity."

Though he's no stranger to controversy, there's been surprisingly little reaction to - or, indeed, awareness of - the Palestinian show. "It's not been a hotbed of conversation within the Jewish community here," says Barbara Raynor, with the Jewish Federation of Greater Houston. "In fact, no one really knows about it."

It has, however, garnered attention from the Arab-American community. On opening night, the museum was packed a half hour before the doors were set to open. Arab-Americans, many of whom had never set foot in a museum, arrived two hours early with their kids in tow.

Houston is not such an unlikely place for the first Palestinian art exhibit in the US, though locals may not know it. The city has both a world-renowned art scene and a large, professional Arab-American community - about 65,000 strong. And while not the Arab mecca away from home that Detroit is, Houston is quietly emerging as a center of Arab understanding in America.

"It's very important to let the message out that Palestinians ... have a message to deliver about feelings, about love, about tension, about distress, and about the yearning for liberty," says George Zaiback, president of the American Federation of Ramallah, Palestine, and a Houston optometrist.

Since the exhibit's opening, Arab-American groups from around the country, including those in Boston, Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco, have asked about bringing the exhibit to their city.

Artist Tyseer Barakat says he's delighted, and a little surprised. As he talks, he stands next to his 1997 work entitled, "Father," a massive wooden filing cabinet that used to belong to the Israeli military. On the bottom of each drawer, he has burned the tale of his father's sad journey. Visitors may open each drawer to find a different scene, including his stay at a refugee camp and his toil in the fields. Mr. Barakat says he hopes the exhibit will add to visitors' understanding.

"One thing I appreciate very much about the American people," he says, "is that if they know, they act."

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