

Hani Zurob: Art Without Borders



It is 1984 and ten year old Hani Zurob sits in his father's study. There is yet another curfew in Rafah, Gaza and it will be days before he and his family will be able to leave their home. The walls around him are lined with books and out of boredom perhaps he takes one down to read and begins to draw images from the pages. This was the first time Hani Zurob realised he wanted to be a painter.

Skip forward a few years and he would send these illustrated books to his childhood crush when he could- just a few streets away but separated by warlike circumstances. He speaks now of the promise he made to her all those years ago: "I told her I will be a painter and I will have a studio in Paris," he grins as he sits in the actualisation of that dream. ("Did you tell her you did it?" it is hard to resist asking. He did, he confirms.)

This quiet poetry runs through Zurob's stories and lines his studio walls where his work hangs as he sits now sipping coffee with his friend and fellow painter Mohammed Joha. Qoudsi, his son, stares wide eyed down from one of the canvases and Zurob explains this project in which his five year old is at the core.

Zurob may well be a card carrying citizen now here in France, but in the eyes of certain laws he will always be that boy from Gaza. "For the Palestinian, where he goes he can bring only the problems with him [...] It's not about place, it's about to be or not to be because [the Israeli occupying forces] don't want you to be there and he doesn't want you also to be outside." Zurob's wife is from Jerusalem and must return regularly, when his son leaves with her Zurob cannot accompany them. As young Qoudsi begins to acquire the language to articulate his confusion he asks: "Papa why can't you come with us? Every time you stay here." This is a big topic for such a little boy and without adequate, tangible answers Zurob tells his son simply that he is afraid of flying.

For his latest project he paints a space where the two can talk about these problems and try to find a solution. In this walled, liminal space Qoudsi sits with his toys- notably all forms of transport- waiting for his dad just as he waits in Jerusalem. At first glance these paintings appear sort of sad- a lost boy alone with his toys in no mans land- but Zurob prefers instead for them to be seen in terms of a sense of working through wrongs and gathering strength of conviction by generation. Hani Zurob tells his story through his paintings; Qoudsi now begins to develop his own form of articulation, who knows what he will eventually say and how loudly he will say it. "It's like a kind of heritage," says Zurob.

This personal development has not just inspired Zurob's work thematically, but stylistically also. In previous pieces exhibited at L'Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris and the Henry Moore Institute in the UK, Zurob's work was distinctly expressionist with bold, thick color vividly depicting

figures. Now in this latest project lines are accurate, clear and focused. Surely a reflection of a first born's influence on the life of a father.

Yet, Zurob asserts, his paintings do not represent a story of particularity. Of course he has been immensely influenced by his Palestinian heritage and experiences but what he aims to create is not works based upon a personal story, nor a specifically political one, but something far more universal. The experience of the Palestinian is somewhat singular but more importantly to Zurob it is marked by bigger, more relatable themes such as exile, liminality, diaspora, lineage and identity. This is a battle for Zurob since his intriguing background means he is in constant danger of being pigeonholed: "I am proud of my Palestinian heritage," he explains, "but not for somebody else's point." His work is informed by his past but not dictated by it and as his style progresses ever forward he remains steady in his refusal to convert these experiences into a neat marketing ploy.

More information can be found on his website [HERE](#) and his monograph "Between Exits" is available to buy [HERE](#).

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