

Made in Palestine

May 3 through October 23, 2003.

A celebrated modern artist and theoretician claimed that, for art, sincerity is not enough; truth is of the essence. I am persuaded that a lot of “sincere art” may not have any aesthetic value. Yet, if you take the step from “sincerity” to “authenticity,” matters sound altogether different. Without authenticity there can be no good art. Authenticity is closer to truth than sheer sincerity.

Made in Palestine struck me at first by its authenticity. Then, by the poignancy in relating events, expressing lived experiences, projecting screams, ire, tears, hopes and desires. Next, by the new artistry which has little to do with well recognizable Western schools even though this seemed to be an argument in “defending” the show.

The exhibition is steeped in present history, its making, its abhorrent realities. It also exemplifies the way real talents react to real events. It embodies civic virtues, and human foibles.

To organize this show, show of art under occupation, the curators performed an act of courage--physical, intellectual, political. They encountered enormous political and logistic obstacles in digging, selecting artifacts--with undeniably explosive contents-- securing visas for artists—many of whom were in perilous situations. Throughout political, this show is nevertheless not forcibly politicized; it also seems to have a deeper artistic focus, and be less dependent on conventions than the few Palestinian exhibitions preceding it (New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Williamsburg¹). It veers in content from the everyday maddening tensions of a brutal war to “routine” acts of repression, and the experience thereof, to poetic meditations on geography and history, as well as the hoped-for future.

Twenty-three artists, working in Gaza, the West Bank, Ramallah, Damascus, Germany, Israel, or the US, document in heart-rending images the violence perpetrated against the Palestinian people, the agony of outer and inner exile, the devastation of the land, the cycle of unending de-humanization. Amidst a variegated gamut of styles, the themes are strongly convergent: a nation claiming its right to autonomy, revolting by any means against being displaced, exiled, reduced to second- and third-rank status, inhibited, censored, imprisoned in its own land, when not summarily executed.

There are two maps of Palestine in this show: one in the entrance hall--sleek and charcoal-black, inexplicably void, suggesting a “black hole;” another one hangs in the last room, map of a larger *Palestine: From the Mediterranean to the Jordan River* (2003) by Samia Halaby, made of colored acrylic strips, gay, wishful. Oscillating between the deep darkness of the present and the artistically projected absolute glory of the future, where does Palestine stand? What is it? Where is it? I think it is mostly in the hearts and minds of a non-homogenous, secular and religious, people, heirs of an extraordinarily rich cultural heritage, and able and willing to mix with the contemporary world at large, people who want their homeland in reality, in actu, and who repeatedly vowed that “all artists shall return” there. Normally, I would have objected to both of these maps for reasons of unreality, but after pondering the matter, I decided one has to allow, nay, welcome, every artist to write, draw and re-draw the map as they wish, according to their own mood and premonitions—symbolically, even though mere symbolism may be static, reductive and objectionable in some respects. Yet it is a display of symbolisms that dominates this show, with very few exceptions.

In the entrance hall, Emily Jacir unfolded a refugee tent, the 2001 *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages which were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948*, the names of which are embroidered in black on the white cotton refugee tent. Within the exhibition, Emily Jacir also built and filled with books a library shelf in a door opening above our heads. A collaboration with Anton Sinkewich, it contains a collection of recent volumes about Palestinians, by Palestinians, and about Palestinian history.

Out of his series *Forgotten Survivors*, (1997-2003), John Halaka presented a huge canvas (87” x 272”), in rubber-stamped ink and acrylic: *Stripped of Their Identity and Driven from Their Land.* It figures a chaotic procession of naked, hirsute men, women and children, chased like wild beasts or herds of nationless undesirables from their homeland. In its center, a colossus with undecided features, resembling a man of the caves, carries another on his shoulder. The frightening diaspora of silhouettes on the surface of the canvas, as well as the sheer size of the painting, leaves behind the bitter taste of nightmare.

Enhancing the sensation of dread, an installation by Mary Tuma of robes made from a single piece of black muslin on wirehangers: *Homes for the Disembodied* (2000), and Mervat Essa's heap of ceramic replicas of the registered bags the refugees were allowed to carry in exile, completes the somber first room installations.

A number of paintings made in prisons, out of pillowcase cloth--the only-allowed prison materials, were modeled on the Mexican muralists' style with their rhetoric of fists, flames, and crumbling walls. This series oscillates between symbolism and propaganda, the leitmotif being, however, the suffocation inflicted, day-in, day-out, on the Palestinians by over fifty years of occupation, their ensuing revolt and inextinguishable thirst for freedom.

A series of nine photographs by Rula Halawani, titled *Negative Incursion* (2002) uses black and white negative prints to highlight, in a hyperrealistic way, the hideousness of executions, bodies crushed by tanks, and that old woman encompassing, from a hilltop in a gesture of unforgettable sadness, the sea of destruction. Halawani is also known for an intense and dramatic suite of color chiaroscuro photographs of her Jerusalem, at night, sinisterly emptied of pedestrians. She is by far one of the best artist-reporters of the conflict and perhaps, in other areas too.

A room was devoted to Rana Bishara's *Blindfolded History* (2003.) A young artist, author of remarkable abstract compositions using local plants and dyes, that sing the splendor of the land, its people, its architecture, she turns here to scenes of wailing and desolation, silk-screened on glass. The work was executed in a pointillist manner from photographs, with chocolate as a medium—its consistency and color approaching those of blood. Delicate in form, tragic in content, Bishara's interlocking glass panels are riveting.

A note of charming humor is introduced by Ashraf Fawakhry's *I Am A Donkey / Made In Palestine*, ode to the resilient animal--a Palestinian emblem; and also an illustration of that donkey that allegedly saved the life of Emile Habiby, author of an admirable picaresque epic: *The Secret Life of Saeed, the ill-fated "pessoptimst"*. This novel is a tale similar in absurd humor to Voltaire's *Candide* or to Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schwejk*. The book is a minor classic, modest in proportions, but rich in astuteness and invention, synthesizing not only ancient Arab literary traditions, but embodying a universal subterfuge of reason: Saeed is conceivably the impersonation of a fool and a coward, yet through his misadventures at the hands of his jailers whom he would rather please, if he could (he is beaten up for quoting Shakespeare from memory!), he brushes the tableau of the hopelessly absurd life of a people caught in the meanders of an inexorable occupying power. Impaled, seemingly forever, on a stake, Saeed saves himself by vanishing into the extraterrestrial spheres where he is finally rejoined by friends and loved ones. The slightly ridiculous "eternal optimist" declares defeat on the level of reality! Unlike *Candide*, however, who is a simpleton hooked to the sorry version of the philosopher's "all is for the best in the best of possible worlds" and who ends up by famously wanting "to cultivate his garden," Habiby's Saeed offers a tongue-in-cheek solution to the horror of life in Palestine. The novel is an interlacing of humor and wisdom, arresting by its freshness and ingenuity.

In the show, Fawakhry's miniature square medallions about the legendary donkey made it appear coiffed with all possible attributes—graffiti, jewels, Camel cigarettes, etc.

Yet Fawakhry also drew a pathetic picture of martyrdom: against the backdrop of dark xerographs, a series of red plastic meshes stand for the hearts of the martyrs.

The same room houses now three large family photographs by Noël Jabbour of 2000 and 2001, titled *Vacant Seats*: one picturing the Azzami family in Beit Laha, Gaza- the other two portraying the Danan and the Oudeh families; all lost family members, martyred in the conflict. The family members' faces are frozen in grief. It is a documentary piece of art in which too many will recognize themselves.

Extraordinary is the 2000 series of neo-expressionist ink-on-paper drawings by recently freed from prison Jawad Ibrahim: *Between the Bullet and the Stone*. Black-and-white heads, hit, disfigured, unrecognizable—a sequence of irregular cavities produced by "percussion caps" – each more haunting than Edward Munch's *Scream*.

A dark room divided by a partition, let's see, a found chest of flat drawers originally containing records of Palestinian houses destroyed in the occupation. Tyseer Barakat, architect, painter, choreographer and

calligrapher, possibly the greatest artist alive in the Palestinian lineage of absolute originality, returned to his village only to discover in one of the drawers his father's name and the address of the house whence he was expelled as a child. Inside the drawers, he painted in sepia the odyssey of his family calling the piece *Father*. Enemy of all rhetoric and hollow display of symbols and emblems, Barakat, born in a refugee camp in Gaza, who went on to study in Alexandria, and then returned to the West Bank, belongs to that rare breed of cosmopolitan patriots who are "artists first, and Palestinians next." His artistic concentration aims at the "spirit of the place" and its specific rhythms. The exquisite use of monochromatic dyes and the Assyrian stylization of his abstractions exercise a spell as from beyond the grave: the latest modern and the most antiquated styles achieve, in fusion, an effortless dance macabre. Elsewhere, Barakat exercises a constructivist bent, redrawing, as it were, the profiles of Palestinian houses and villages in a vertical dimension. Well-traveled and well-read, he conflates in his work the Arabs' flight from Granada, Andalusia in the fifteenth century and his mother's anguished flight from Jenin in the wake of the occupation.

Images of the Intifada (1982) and of the massacres of Sabra and Shatilla (1985,) were painted in acrylic on wood by Abdul Hay Mussalam; while an impressive series of twelve pieces, *Jenin* (2002) presented by Abdel Rahmen Al Muzayen, caught the eye with remarkably stylized compositions.

In the last room, one wall is occupied by six larger-than-life low-relief portraits of *I, Ismael* executed in cracked mud on wood, by an otherwise colorful and vivacious symbolist: Suleiman Mansour, who with Tyseer Barakat and Vera Tamari is the founder and organizer of the Al Wasiti Art Center in Al Quds. Slight variations are noticeable among the Ismael portraits; one has his eyes closed, one harbors a fleeting smile, a third one seems to have an erection. Impressive by their neo-primitive allure, bathed in the mists of sacred history, they reek of ancient mythology, grandiose and mysterious. At their feet, an impressive bed of cracked clay is decorated with red flowers—sign of veneration, perhaps.

Next to her flowery map of Palestine, composed of floating multicolor acrylic pieces, Samia Halaby exhibits several other abstract works executed in a Western idiom. Vera Tamari shows an impressive negative print of a 1000-years olive tree, both as symbol of the Palestinian resilience and as nostalgic piece of nature. Underneath, and in stark contrast to the dream-like beauty of the tree, proliferates a forest of miniature pastel-colored plastic olive trees in regular rows.

The whole show is dedicated to the towering personality of Mustafa-al-Hallaj, a highly respected artist from Syria, who died in a fire in 2002. He is present here with a vast set of symbolic friezes--printed from cuts in masonite—hundreds of feet in length. Uniting art-history and history in this dizzying unfolding scroll where Egyptian motifs inhabit contemporary events (and vice-versa), it is a tour-de-force of the narrative imagination. At the center of this enormously variegated universe, the artist portrays himself as God, Man, and Satan at once, in styles reminiscent of Blake and Bosch. The striking note is, however, the archaic consciousness of antique Egypt that informs this huge algorithm of engravings. Among them, there are forests of crosses. A cross belongs to the artist's homonym, the 10th century Sufi Al Hallaj who was crucified for having divulged to the public elements of the secret Sufi mystical doctrine. This inexhaustible universe of myths and symbols in traditional calligraphy, refined by enormous art-historical erudition, is the crowning piece of the show, cutting across centuries of styles, chronicling half a globe of visual manifestations, the show easily and directly spoke to the sensibilities of our time.

Let us hope that the turn initiated here, away from the exclusively negative definitions of Palestinian self-identity, and the dreary insistence on victimization, will continue in the direction of self-assertion of national identity, explicit nowhere better than in the stunning artistic creativity of this people.

Where the soul is alive, renaissance lurks around the corner.

Ileana Marcoulesco

Notes:

1) Fifty- three Palestinian artists were exhibited in 2002 in Williamsburg in a show named: "Bridges to Palestine."

2) The biblical Ismael, elder son of Abraham, and son of Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl whom Sara gave to Abraham, as she was incapable of conceiving herself. After the belated birth of Isaac, Ismael and Hagar were expelled. Ismael was a "wild ass of a man, always at odds with everybody" but the prophecy has it that he was blessed by God to become the founder of a great nation. He made Mecca into a religious center and lived to be 137 years old. He is considered the ancestor of all the Arabs.

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ARTISTS:

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[Tyseer Barakat](#)

[Rana Bishara](#)

[Rajie Cook](#)

[Mervat Essa](#)

[Ashraf Fawakhry](#)

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POETRY

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