

Made in Palestine

May 3 through October 23, 2003.

The Stuff of Dreams...The Stuff of Nightmares

It is said that dreams represent the mythology of the individual and that the mythology of a people in its different cultural forms, i.e., art, literature, and music represents the dream of the collective. This cannot be truer than in the case of *Made in Palestine*, a group show at the Station in Houston, Texas, comprised of Palestinian artists from across the world, currently the homeland of their Diaspora. True, but for an exception, and not a minor one at that. The exception being that the art presented in the show does by no means reflect the dream of the Palestinian collective. To the contrary, it reflects the nightmares of a people that have been disinherited and subjected to occupation and humiliation since 1948. 1948 is when the Palestinian people were uprooted from their land to make room for the European Jews to have a country of their own in the land and in the very homes of the Palestinians who had lived there from time immemorial.

The Palestinians call the events of 1948 *Al-Nakba*, the catastrophe. And can there be anything more catastrophic than waking up to find that you have no home, no country and no means for subsistence? From being a rich merchant, or a middle class teacher, or a self-sufficient farmer to becoming a number on a card handed by the UN to each refugee family. A card entitles the bearer to a few pounds of flour and sugar and some dried fish, courtesy of those who brought about that catastrophe in the first place. Days go by and these days turn into years and the dream of returning home still lingers. This dream is entwined with the nightmare of an occupation. An occupation that wants to make sure that, now that the land has been taken, the people and all that belongs to them, including their very way of life, cease to exist. In a chapter from the book of the obliteration of the American Indian: those who went after the buffalo in yesteryear are perhaps the ancestors or at least the mentors of the olive tree killers of today. Do not just kill the people; kill their way of life and that would kill them. Buffalo Bill still lives and still takes his show on the road. To the ends of the world. Mid West, Mid East, no matter. What matter is it to kill? Buffalo Bill and Olive Tree Sharon and Company never met, but they meet in a lifestyle, or is it a death-style; "I kill, therefore I am."

The world is divided into three camps: the active participants in the Palestinian tragedy, the zealous supporters and the silent majority. The show at the Station is meant for all three groups. Look into any of the works and you will see yourself somewhere. Whether you look away or you look down or you just stand there and stare through the work and into the vast space above or into a mental image of your grocery list, you are there. You will see yet another irony of history. You will see the occupation still manages to conquer and lose at the same time. It conquers the land, but loses to the people, their will of life, and their huge capacity for love and creation. Their will for life blunts the sword of the hordes of history and of the neo-barbarians who come now dressed as saints and saviors. The wolves in the sheep's clothes.

At the entrance to the show you are greeted by Emily Jacir's tent; *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948*. The tent was a home, and the home like the tent is now empty except for the memories. And if those walls could speak... In 1948 Palestinians were forced out of their homes as part of the world's effort to correct the mistakes of history and to clear its conscience by victimizing one people to champion another. The tent is the refugee tent in which hundreds of thousands of Palestinians suddenly found themselves living. Jacir's tent has the names of all 418 villages depopulated by Israel in 1948. It is a compact and practical way for the artist to express the scope of the tragedy. But the real homework is left for us. In the place of that one tent, try to visualize the 418 villages. In each one of those villages, try to visualize hundreds of homes and thousands of lives in them. You do the math. And if there were an exhibition space to accommodate those numbers, is there enough space in this universe to express the sorrow of those lives represented by this tent?

This sorrow is addressed in Mary Tuma's *Homes for the Disembodied*. This piece is intelligently displayed right across from Jacir's tent. If you are at a loss for emotions, you can borrow from Tuma's black flowing silk dresses that hang from ceiling to floor, but encompass the world with their pain. As you approach the galleries you see those two pieces and realize that the scene is being set for yet another Greek tragedy. This one has repeated itself daily for fifty-five years now. This is the story of the butcher that can never kill enough and the victim that refuses to die. Enjoy the show.

It is to that number, Fifty-five, that Rana Bishara's piece is dedicated. Fifty-five glass plates hang like the blades of guillotines. On them are images in chocolate of the daily suffering of her people. Why chocolate? Because dried blood looks like chocolate. One wonders how many artists in the world can come up with such observations. Artists who experiment in style and medium can now add to their files those of Bishara. Experimentations in blood... and chocolate. Study the images and consider this: where were we all when this outrage was being inflicted in the name of humanity? Suddenly, the guillotine-like glass plates hang over our guilty consciences. Suddenly, our hands reach up to feel the back of our necks.

Tyseer Barakat's piece, *Father*, is equally powerful. It consists of a set of flat files each showing, when pulled open, a different stage in his father's life. This journey takes us from Al Majdal, his home village, through the Diaspora and life in the refugee camp, to the bitter end and death in exile. This piece could be titled "The Refugee's Progress" or in this case "regress," for this is the refugee as the world would like him to be, neatly contained in a drawer in a flat file somewhere in the corridors of history. Only, when you open these drawers, you see the pain and sorrows of a lifetime in exile. It is like opening Pandora's box. Opening it perhaps explains all the suffering that that part of the world has endured for more than half a century. And would it make you marvel to know that the same set of flat files was used by the occupiers to store files of the newcomers to the deliberately depopulated land? Whose land is it anyway, you ask? Well, whose set of flat files is it, is perhaps Barakat's answer.

And along those lines of "discourse" is Nida Sinnokrot's installation *AL-JAZ/CNN* which consists of two television sets, one with CNN's news reports and the other with the same news as reported by Al-Jazeera, the Qatar news station. For the real news, examine the works of art around you. For everything else check out *AL-JAZ/CNN* to see the world "talking at" each other. Of course, in that din who can hear what the actual victims have to say? They open their mouths to speak and they are abruptly shushed because Al Jazeera/CNN is on. At the start, I said that the show has the earmarks of a Greek tragedy, and Sinnokrot's piece offers all six elements of a Greek tragedy as prescribed by Dr. Aristotle. *AL-JAZ/CNN* presents spectacle, music-- or the sound of cannons, diction, and language (and there is more than enough of that,) character, same as before, thought, or the lack thereof, and a good plot, which is necessary to produce the tragic effect of pity and fear. Put together, those elements should effect "a pleasurable catharsis," i.e. you feel bad for a minute or two and then go home. But wait, thanks to modern technology you are achieving all of the above from the comfort of your home. And who would have guessed that CNN and Co is the new Greek theater and Ted Turner the new Sophocles. Aristophanes, where art thou?

Sinnokrot's *Rubber-Coated Rocks* is another installation that uses humor to point the finger at the hypocrisy of the world. After a short period of coy protestation over the use of battlefield rifles to shoot children, the international community went back to its daily affairs after the Israeli army introduced rubber-coated bullets. Yet these bullets are not any less lethal when shot at the hearts, heads, or eyes of children. Jawad Ibrahim's series in this show, *Between the Bullet and the Stone*, gives a shocking testimony to this. Sinnokrot's piece could have an industrial application. All that it needs is an American investor to cash in on it and start marketing it to all the oppressed of the world. The advertisement could read, "for your next uprising, now introducing rubber-coated stones; the weapon of choice for the helpless. Comes in a variety of sizes and colors." The question remains, would all those calling for an end to the Intifada and who denounce it as terrorism, reverse their thinking and permit it to achieve its goals of freedom and independence, if the weapons were changed to 'rubber-coated' rocks?

Noel Jabbour and Rula Halawani's photographs document the "mundane" reality of life in the cities and camps. Their photographs capture the death and the destruction that is a commonplace, everyday occurrence. Their work forcefully reminds us that these horrors should never be allowed to become routine, accepted events. Death should be allowed to maintain its dignity. It should not become such a common event that we stop noticing it. Halawani offers negative prints of scenes from the destruction of Ramallah in the Incursion of 2002. The negative prints highlight the contrast of black and white, which sharpens our perception of the damage inflicted on innocent people, for example, the woman in the forefront of one photograph who points to the rubble that was perhaps once her home. Both artists focus their lenses on different angles of the same spectacle. Halawani offers images of the general destruction, while Jabbour gives us the effect of that destruction on individual lives through a series called *Vacant Seats*. In one print from this series, we see surviving family members posing with a painting of their murdered child. The living are in the foreground. Behind them on a wall hangs a picture of the dead. From behind you see the

stares in their eyes, like daggers to the heart, demanding justice and asking why such youth is allowed to be destroyed so wantonly. The faces of the dead loom in the pictures more like ghosts than images. They make a more powerful effect and offer a more urgent call for action than Shakespeare's ghost could ever hope to stir.

A people that manage to laugh even under the knife are a people impossible to defeat. Ashraf Fawakhry's *I am Donkey/ Made in Palestine* exemplifies the Palestinian's ability to live, to love, and to laugh even when confronted by death. The work consists of an image of a donkey printed on wood. But do not be alarmed; this donkey is not the one from the U.S. Democratic Party banner. Same animal, different donkey. This one, called Bassawi, or one from Al-Bassa, the artist's village in Palestine, stands for the resilience of the Palestinian regardless of what weight he or she is made to bear. Even if it is the weight of an Arab nation that does not seem to have enough sleep, or the weight of an occupation force that never seems to have enough weapons. Fawakhry's donkey is also an homage to the donkey that saved the life of Said the 'Pessoptimist,' (a person who is neither a pessimist nor an optimist), the protagonist of the famous novel by the Palestinian novelist, Emile Habiby. It reminds me of a Palestinian friend of mine who was arrested by the police of one of the "brethren" Arab countries, because he was Palestinian (the equivalent of an outlaw in most Arab countries). He told the story of his arrest later to a foreign journalist, saying in a heavy accent, "They beat me up and they called me dongy (donkey)." Last and foremost, the donkey is one of the few animals that, without looking up, will always walk home no matter where you leave him. One day, sooner or later, Fawakhry and all of the other Palestinian donkeys will return home even without having to look up.

Fawakhry's *Line 13* is a more serious piece which was thrown out of the exhibition at the Museum of Haifa where it was first shown. It consists of a table with thirteen lighted red hearts that stand for the first 13 Arab martyrs in Israel of the Intifada of 2000. On the wall above it are two black-and-white mirror images of a rock-throwing Palestinian youth.

Other works in the show deal with the questions of exile and loss. Whereas the work of the younger generation tends to be more defiant and has a dose of dark humor, a certain sense of helplessness and a romantic yearning for a green Palestine still prevail in the works of the older artists. Abdel Rahman Al Muzayen's series *Jenin* offers the image of Palestine as a woman (this is something familiar in his work) whose bent back carries the weight of the destruction of the city of Jenin. John Halaka's *Stripped of Their Identity and Driven from Their Land* shows human figures with no distinct features, wandering in the deserts of exile. Suleiman Mansour's *I, Ismael* is a series of male figures sculpted in mud and suspended on wooden panels. Ismael is the father of the Arabs, and like the Palestinians he was sentenced to life in the wilderness because his half brother, Isaac, father of the Jews, was the chosen one. Mansour's Ismael stands there helpless, but as his erection grows, the cracks in the mud he is made of diminish, and a flower garden flourishes in front of him, symbolizing a fruitful Ismael. In the works of all three artists, the human figure is passive. The woman with a bent back, Ismael with his arms glued to his sides, and Halaka's cripples and lost souls represent the Palestine of a bygone era when everybody was entitled to speak in the name

of Palestine except the Palestinians themselves.

The yearning for home and land is evident in the works of three women artists. Samia A. Halaby's piece is entitled *Palestine, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River*-- the borders of Palestine from west to east. What at first seems like a large canvas filled with splotches of vibrant color is actually a collage of many canvases cut out in abstract shapes and pinned together to create a larger whole. It is as if each smaller abstract piece represents a part of Palestine's soul that Halaby is desperate to preserve and cherish. Where the pieces come together one can almost see a land of beautiful colors, covered with millions of flowers or millions of butterflies. Vera Tamari's *Tale of a Tree* consists of ceramic olive trees on a plexiglass base. On the wall above is a black-and-white photo of a lone olive tree, one that looks sad and melancholy as it awaits the return of those who planted it. Mahmoud Darwish's line comes to mind, "Were the olive trees to remember those who planted them, their oil would turn into tears." Mervat Essa reenacts the tragedy of her family's exile in her piece *Saffurya*. The piece is similar in style Vera Tamari's. It shows a photograph of her family's destroyed hometown of Bir'am. On a base in front of that photograph sits a group of 17 ceramic sacks of varied sizes, representing her family members who had to leave their home and homeland with only a sack on their backs.

The theme of struggle and resistance is common to the pieces, *Sabra and Shatila* by Abdul Hay Mussalam and *On the Occasion of the Day of the Palestinian Prisoner* by Mohammad Al Rakouie, which was actually made in prison. Both artists use traditional motifs in Palestinian art, for example, the clenched and raised fist, the kuffiyah, the barbwire, and the AK-47. Men and women in fighting positions in Mussalam's work are reminiscent of the posters issued in the days of the PLO in Lebanon before the Israeli invasion of 1982. Similar in form and spirit, is the painting, *USA*, by Adnan Yahya. In a cartoonist's editorial style, it depicts Sharon holding heads of Palestinian children over a kerosene stove that is kept lit by American matches.

This show is dedicated to the Palestinian artist, Mustafa Al Hallaj, who died trying to save his work during a fire at his studio in Damascus. Hallaj, a veteran Palestinian artist, transcended his own personal tragedy and that of his people in his piece, *Self-Portrait as God, Man and the Devil*, by addressing universal issues and themes such as God, man and the devil, good, evil, and hope. He went through all the stages of self-expression in his career, and as he matured he was ready to embrace all humanity. Sophocles, Shakespeare, Milton, Dante, Blake and many other great poets, thinkers, and artists have tried to deal with those persistently human issues. Hallaj was one of them, having seen more than enough of the evil of this world and probably not enough of the good. Having seen man work in ways fit for the devil and having wondered where God stands in all of it, Hallaj was primed to speak of all of the players to audiences everywhere. Alas, his death deprived us of an artist of world-class stature.

The show is comprehensive thanks to the tireless efforts of James Harithas and the team at the Station. The quality of the work varies. But, that is to be expected from a show of this scope, one that has successfully introduced contemporary Palestinian art and artists for the

first time to an American audience. Mr. Harithas and his team must be commended for making the effort to gather the many works from different countries and showing them in the U.S. at a time when being an Arab or even being remotely sympathetic to Arabs is dangerous. This is a time when the freedom of expression of the American people is in danger of being obliterated. A time when Sharon can be described as a man of peace, and the Palestinians are labeled enemies of humanity who have no right to life, let alone to express themselves through art or any other media. This exhibition is thus a part of the fight for the very spirit of this country, an attempt to save it from those who want to give it a taste of the Middle Ages. This exhibition gives a human face to the Palestinians and their struggle, and lets them speak from the heart about their tragic and often misunderstood cause. It thus gives room for that illusive and idealistic hope that perhaps one day, art and artists can change the world for the better.

Santiago Nasar, New York City, 2003

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