

# THE DAILY STAR

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## Palestinian artists create facts on the ground in America

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BEIRUT: It was the German-Jewish philosopher, Walter Benjamin, who memorably said, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule." In Palestine and the Occupied Territories today, despite valiant attempts by both sides to build bridges between Israelis and Palestinians, poverty is rife and the oppressive extremism of the occupier everywhere.

In Lebanon today, the dangerous psychology of chaotic fear is imposed on the people by the random bomb attacks that could occur anywhere at any time.

Across the globe today, from Madrid to the United States, the fear of terror bomb attacks is omnipresent.

Never were Benjamin's words more appropriate. Though he was writing in 1940 about the Fascist threat, his "state of emergency" continues today - and it is an emergency for all global citizens.

Yet in many ways it is when the daily realities of people who live their lives under oppression are seen by the world - through images and through art - that we really understand the weighty significance of Benjamin's words.

Increasingly in 2005, perhaps due to a rising interest and awareness in a region that is dominating global politics, more and more exhibitions by artists, filmmakers and photographers from the Arab world (and Palestine in particular) about the Arab world are reaching Europe and the United States.

In early February a one-week photographic show on the subject of Palestine was put on in Madrid, at cultural center La Boca del Lobo. The show, entitled "Mirando a Palestina: Proyecciones Fotograficas" ("Looking Towards Palestine: Photographic Projections"), brought together Palestinian and international photographers. These included Tarek al-Ghoussein (Palestine), Clemente Bernad (Spain), Andrea Comas (Spain), Peter Fryer (United Kingdom), Rula Halawani (Palestine), Ahmed Jadallah (Palestine), Laura Junka (Finland), Diego Lopez Calvin (Spain), Sallie Dean Shatz (United States), Larry Towell (Canada), and the young refugees in Lebanon and Palestine affiliated with the Save the Children's "Eye to Eye" project.

Such a show was no small feat in a country that though not disposed to supporting the current war in Iraq, recently marked the first anniversary of the Madrid terror train bombings of 2004. It did much to promote the reality of life on the ground in the Occupied Territories to a European audience - with images of funerals, Israeli tanks and bulldozers, bombed-out buildings and simple daily life.

On Sunday and until May 7, citizens of Washington D.C. in the United States will get to see a plethora of Palestinian films in the D.C. Cinema Palestine Film Festival.

An independent, grassroots initiative organized by a committee of American volunteers (students and professionals) in Washington, the festival is an example of how widespread interest has become in the United States in what is going on in Palestine, especially as it is followed in mid-April by the Chicago Palestine Film Festival.

The program of D.C. Cinema Palestine includes the 2002 documentary "Jenin, Jenin" by Mohammed Bakri, winner of Best Film at the Carthage International Film Festival of 2002, as well as Dahna Abourahme's 2004 documentary "Until When ..." - a film set during the current intifada following four Palestinian families in the Dheisheh Refugee Camp near Bethlehem.

Again the majority of the dozen films to be shown explore the social, political and personal issues confronting Palestinians, and the aim according to the organizers is to develop greater understanding and tolerance among the Washington community by offering different perspectives and contrasting "the mass media's often negative portrayal of Palestinians."

A further positive aspect of this festival is that all monies raised from the event will be sent to the "Milk for Preschoolers Program" of ANERA, a non-profit organization whose projects improve Palestinian communities throughout the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon and Jordan.

"The point about D.C. Cinema Palestine is that our audience is not always aware of the complex and depressing situation that is life for the majority of Palestinians," the organizers say on their Web site.

Meanwhile, across the Appalachian Mountains the Chicago Palestine Film Festival begins on April 15 with 23 films from Palestine, Israel, Europe and North America reflecting the diversity of perspectives of Palestinians in exile as well as non-Palestinian filmmakers who have made films about the country and its people. There are more feature/narrative films here as well as personal and hard-hitting documentaries.

Perhaps what is equally significant about this festival, especially in terms of raising the profile of the region and the "state of emergency" in the Occupied Territories, is the number of Arab speakers who will be attending. These are people who are well known in their own nations but barely at all in America - people like Lebanese author Elias Khoury and documentary filmmaker Buthaina Canaan Khoury, emerging filmmaker Shady Srour from Nazareth and Chile's Miguel Littin who has made two recent films about Palestine and his connection to the land of his grandparents.

In terms of contemporary art the brilliant "Made in Palestine" exhibition, which opened in Houston in 2003, opens in San Francisco on April 7, at the SomArts Cultural Center. (It has been hidden from public viewing since the original show because of the reluctance of many American museums to show it due to what could be seen as a U.S. "state of emergency" in the post-9/11 anti-terror climate).

For Rayan al-Amin of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee this is a "momentous occasion because people rarely get to see the rich culture and creativity of the Palestinian people. It will be a unique opportunity to not only experience art but also to learn about the history and current struggle of the Palestinians."

The exhibition features a collection of contemporary art made by 23 Palestinian artists and refugees, who live in the Occupied Territories and in the diaspora. Using oil paintings, works on paper, video, sculpture, textile art, ceramics and photography, the

works on display present individual reflections on the Palestinian contemporary experience and the political situation in Palestine. And the majority of the artists reside in Palestine (Ramallah, Jerusalem, Gaza, Nazareth and Betunia) though a few are dispersed across Middle Eastern countries including Syria, Jordan and Lebanon and the United States (North Carolina, Georgia and New York).

Importantly, "Made in Palestine," which according to Houston's Station Museum where the original show was held was "the first exhibit of contemporary Palestinian art ever displayed in the U.S.," was curated by three Americans who traveled to the Middle East to meet with local artists.

"It is our conviction that the American public deserves to be made aware of Palestinian art as a profound manifestation of the humanity of the Palestinian people," said James Harithas, director of the Station Museum and one of the curators of the show.

The show itself covers issues ranging from the Palestinian diaspora, the Israeli occupation, collective punishment and the daily individual exercise each artist undertakes to survive thus mixing the political with the personal. Featured artists include Rana Bishara and Mustafa al-Hallaj (the work of whom is pictured above), Samia Halaby, Emily Jacir and Hani Zurob.

For Susan Greene, a clinical psychologist and member of the "Made in Palestine" organizing committee, The Justice in Palestine Coalition, the beauty and importance of the exhibition is simply that "Art can be a very powerful way, and sometimes the only way, to reach people who would otherwise be closed minded and encourage them to see and think of the world differently and critically."

Her point is well made.

Yesterday Prime Minister Ariel Sharon vowed to press ahead with the expansion of a Jewish settlement near Jerusalem despite U.S. concerns and Palestinian protests against it. Even more alarming is the news on Monday that Israel is to start dumping 10,000 tons of rubbish in the West Bank every month in a move which may well lead to serious polluting of Palestinian water sources.

For Benjamin's oppressed and the oppressed of today the "state of emergency" they live in remains very real, but at least finally creative and contemporary art and film from Palestine is showing the facts on the ground to an increasingly wide global audience.

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