

Introduction: Broken Narratives and 'Dis-Orientalism'

There appears to have been some sort of agreement between art historians that fine arts were not developed in Palestine until 1948. Samia Taktak Zaru (1989)¹

In my quest to contextualize the lives and work of the artists who are the focal point of this book, and to uncover the cultural foundations upon which their creative output is based, I found numerous gaps and lacunae. Palestinian art is a virtually non-existent category in the historiography of art. Although during the last decade there has been increasing awareness of non-Western cultures, and a growing interest in art originating from so-called peripheral sites,² Palestinian art remains either totally overlooked or relegated to the margins of the art globe.³ One reason for this consistent neglect may be the fact that Palestinians are often conceived in the West in stereotypical terms that are shaded by homogenizing political biases. Thought of as either 'victimized peasants' or as 'evil terrorists', they are categorized in two polarized roles; ironically, both 'good' and 'evil' roles imply their exclusion from the realm of culture.⁴

Furthermore, in Palestinian society of the post-*Nakba* period, mere survival has been the major concern. The *Nakba* (literally, catastrophe) is the Palestinian term used to denote the events before, during and after the war of 1948, events that culminated with the foundation of the State of Israel but at the same time with the destruction of more than 400 Palestinian villages and numerous urban neighbourhoods, the dispersal and exile of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, many of whom became refugees, and the virtual disintegration of traditional Palestinian society and its material infrastructure. Given the scope of this tragedy, it becomes understandable why, even among Palestinians, attempts to narrate the story of Palestinian art have been few and far between, gaining momentum only during the last decade.⁵

In 1986, when I began to conduct my own research on Palestinian art,⁶ the few existent texts devoted to the subject had been written by

major trends that dominate Arab art (and, within this context, the Palestinian art movement), Bader and Anani place the local art scene of the West Bank and Gaza and primary sources that relate to its history at centre stage.²⁵

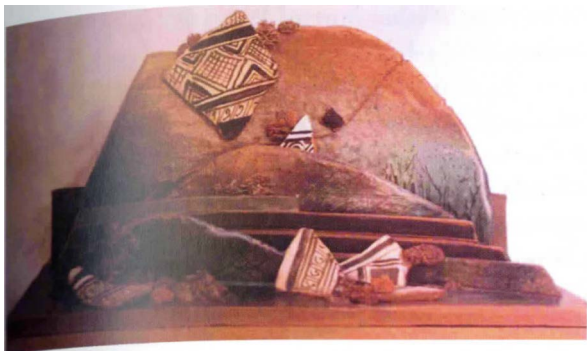
• Ismail Shammout's *Art in Palestine* of 1989, published in Arabic in Kuwait, is the first book-length study of Palestinian art.²⁶ Although it is not a scholarly text, it includes important information, illustrations and an appendix that lists some 400 Palestinians who work in the field of the visual arts. Since Shammout played a central role as one of the founders of the post-1949 National art movement, the accounts of his own experiences that are included in the book are of immense value and interest. He writes:

The disastrous events of 1948 had a jolting effect on Palestinian talents. Rather than succumb to a life of destitution in refugee camps, they would find their way into art academies and institutes. One of these was Ismail Shammout. In 1948, this young man of nineteen years joined his Lydda townfolk in their infamous march to exile. After two years of life in a Gaza refugee camp, he managed to go to Cairo, where he was enrolled in the College of Fine Arts . . . In 1953 Shammout carried a large collection of paintings and drawings which he produced in Cairo and proceeded to Gaza to hold his first exhibition there. The exhibition that was opened on 29 July 1953 was the first exhibition ever to be held by a Palestinian artist on Palestinian land.²⁷

More recently Palestinian artists – notably Vera Tamari, Samia Zaru, Samia Halaby, Tina Sherwell and Bashir Makhoul – have continued to dominate the fields of art commentary and historiography.²⁸

PALESTINIAN ART: 'DIS-ORIENTALISM', VISION AND RE-VISIONS

A brief chronological survey of the pioneering texts devoted to Palestinian art (1970–89) reveals that the early historiography of Palestinian art directly (perhaps inevitably) reflects the dispersed and fragmented reality of Palestinian society. In the 1970s Boullata was living and writing in exile in the US, influenced by Western critical thought; Abdi was operating in Haifa, under the influence of both the Israeli and the communist
• contexts; Bader and Anani were living under military occupation, compiling their text in the West Bank, in an isolated and pressure-filled reality; and Shammout, residing in the Arab world, was working as an official representative of the PLO, espousing a view that subordinates art

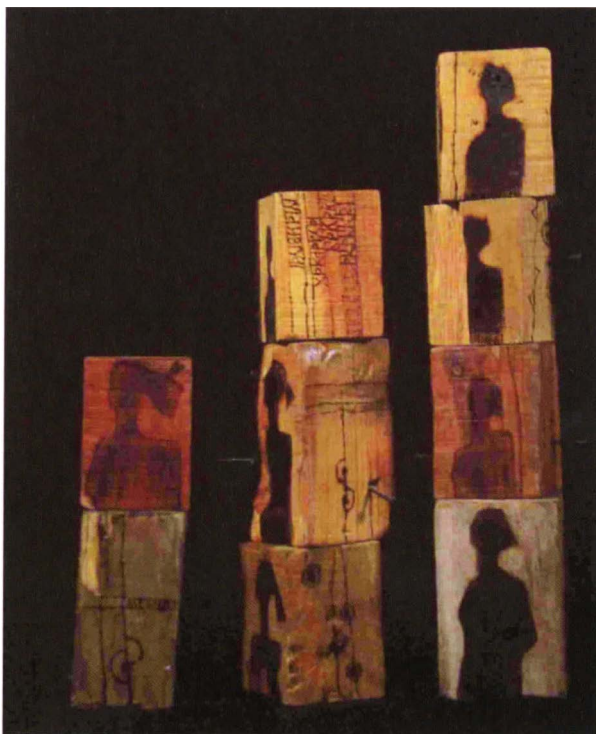


45 Vera Tamari, *Rhythms of the Past*, 1993, ceramics.

As such, they may be viewed as 'visual counterparts' to the work of writers such as Darwish, Kanafani, Emil Habibi and Said himself, as well as to the cinematic work of Elia Suleiman.³³

Modes of visual art-making that are similar to Mansour's compositions of 'mended fragments' may be found in contemporaneous works by numerous Palestinian artists. Samia Zaru's *Struggle and Conflict* presents a collage

of torn embroidered fabrics, cropped calligraphy and dramatic splatters of paint. Nabil Anani's leather and henna compositions show figures that are constructed of separated pieces. Vera Tamari's *Rhythms of the Past* incorporates broken archaeological vessels into her work, attempting to merge past and present into a 'whole' work of art (illus. 45). Tayseer Barakat's scraps of letters and wooden fragments are pieced together into collage-like prints or three-dimensional constructions that successfully breathe new life into the battered and discarded remnants of the past (illus. 46).³⁴ Rana Bishara's torn rice-paper collages,



46 Tayseer Barakat, *Untitled*, 1989, mixed media.