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Opinion

Unknown face of Palestinian art

Jonathan Curiel, Chronicle Staff Writer Published 4:00 am PDT, Sunday, April 3, 2005



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Mustafa Al Hallaj "Self-Portrait as God, the Devil, and Man", 2000, Masonite- cut print, 8 rows, each 14" x 37'

Think of "Jewish art" or "Israeli art," and scores of powerful images come to mind, from **Marc Chagall**'s scenic paintings (Chagall's tapestries are featured prominently in the Israeli Knesset) to Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Maus" cartoons that depict Jews as mice and Nazis as cats. Think of "Palestinian art," and no work surfaces in the popular imagination. Even longtime arts curators would be hard-pressed to cite a single painting by a Palestinian artist.

"It's very, very, hard for a person who's not paying extraordinary attention to know that there is a very ancient society and culture among Palestinians that is both interesting and enriching," says **Samia Halaby**, a former professor at Yale **University's School of Art**, whose paintings have been collected by **the Art Institute of Chicago**, New York's **Guggenheim Museum** and the **British Museum** in London.

Halaby is one of 23 artists whose work comprises "Made in Palestine," an exhibit that opens Thursday at San Francisco's Som-Arts Cultural Center. "Made in Palestine" was previously exhibited in Houston's Station Museum in 2003. Before that, contemporary Palestinian art had never been displayed in such an organized way in the United States, say "Made in Palestine" curators.

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The exhibit, which features Palestinian artists from the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Germany and the United States (Halaby lives in New York), raises an interesting question: Generally speaking, do Palestinian artists create work that's political in nature, or does their art exist outside of

politics, resulting in paintings, sculpture and other objects that have no obvious connection to Palestinian life? The exhibit suggests the former.

"These artists are not doubting what they should paint. They're not saying, 'What's important in this world? How should I express myself?' " Halaby says in a phone interview from her home. "They've got really urgent issues to deal with, and they're very painful and dramatic."

Humor, though, also is evident, as in Ashraf Fawakhry's "I Am Donkey/Made in Palestine." Fawakhry, who lives in Haifa, juxtaposes 47 rubber stamps on wood blocks, each of which has a charcoal-colored donkey. One burro has a "sugar free" label on it, another is painted into a Camel cigarettes package, while another is in the middle of an air-mail envelope.

The repetition, done over two long rows, creates an **Andy Warhol**-like pattern of connecting images. The braying animal is supposed to be a symbol of the Palestinian people's resilience.

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Mustafa Al Hallaj's "Self-Portrait as God, the Devil, and Man" also uses rows of overlapping images to create a bigger sensation. The panels -- intricate etchings that took 10 years to complete -- are an epic retelling of the history of Palestinians from the 11th century B.C. to the present.

Besides incorporating mythological figures, animal representations and fable imagery, Al Hallaj represents himself with a long, white beard, a peacock pattern of shocking white hair and enlarged, almond-shaped eyes that suggest he's in awe of the events depicted. It's like seeing the God from Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel in a dramatic new setting. (In real life, Al Hallaj had snow white hair and a beard.)

"Self-Portrait as God, the Devil, and Man" may be the exhibit's most stunning work (it's 37 feet wide and 9 feet high), but there is tragedy in its history: Al Hallaj died in 2002, the day after "Made in Palestine" curators visited his home/studio in Damascus. An electrical fire ravaged the space; Al Hallaj died after running back in to save his works. He had already managed to rescue "Self-Portrait as God, the Devil, and Man," and was trying to grab other art.

Hallaj , 64, was known throughout the Arab world. Born in what is now Israel, he has been described variously as "Syria's most famous artist" and an "icon of contemporary Arab graphic arts."

"He was quite an extraordinary guy," says **James Harithas**, the director of the Station Museum, who toured the Middle East for a month with Halaby in search of work to include in the exhibit. "When I walked down into the cellar he was working in and I took one look at him, I said, 'Oh my God, it's God. What do I say now?' "

Now Harithas has much to say about Al Hallaj and the other artists in "Made in Palestine." The exhibit has paintings (including "prison art" smuggled out of an Israeli jail), ink drawings, photographs, ceramic works and several oversize pieces. The latter include a refugee tent that symbolizes Palestinian villages destroyed during the founding of Israel in 1948 and five ceiling-high silk dresses that "provide a metaphor for the status of a people who are known more for the shadow they cast on current events than for their own personalities and culture," according to the Station Museum.

The exhibit was supposed to run for three months in Houston, but Harithas extended it another three months after it drew more than 5,000 people. He says it "changed the city. People opened their minds to the Palestinian issue. Not just the art community came." In fact, Harithas says that Houston's Jewish community accepted the exhibit, but one Jewish leader told him, "We have to do an Israeli exhibit as well someday."

Still, controversy erupted last year when people wanted to bring the exhibit to Westchester County in New York. A planned fund-raiser featuring slide-show images from "Made in Palestine" turned into a countywide debate about free speech after a local assemblyman, Ryan Karben, said the event should be canceled.

Karben, who objected to its being at a county facility, said some of the art "promotes terrorism and violence." For example, Karben criticized an acrylic/wood work that he said "shows the **Hamas** symbol of a raised fist holding a rifle." The work depicting armed Palestinians is titled "Uprising in the Occupied Territories."

Karben also criticized a piece by Fawakhry that memorializes Palestinian suicide bombers. That piece

is not in the San Francisco exhibit because it needs restoration, Harithas says.

Despite the brouhaha, the Westchester show went on, with Halaby saying the attention helped attendance, including that of Jewish leaders. A Westchester paper, the **Journal News**, reported that a rabbi from a nearby temple attended the event and said that the exhibit's "problem is that there's no context," but that the rabbi then met with an exhibit organizer, with whom he was "interested in building bridges."

Thus, the exhibit actually brought Jews and Palestinians together in a positive way, in a face-to-face manner that may have humanized both parties.

Although much can be read into the art that's coming to San Francisco, Halaby says she keeps her politics separate from her art. Her work, "Palestine, from the Mediterranean Sea to the Jordan River," is the exhibit's most abstract painting. Seven feet tall and 14 feet wide, it's a pastiche of colorful circles, blobs and amorphous shapes -- a kind of confetti landscape that seems to represent the topography of historic Palestine, complete with sea blue and olive green.

"Maybe I'm the one artist in the show who people will look at and say, 'Well, the piece is not political as much as the title is political,' " Halaby says. "When I first started thinking as a Palestinian and people would ask, 'Where is Palestine in your work?,' I went through the history of art and decided, 'I'm going to be an artist, and that's the most political thing I can be as a Palestinian.' "

"Made in Palestine" runs Thursday through April 21 at SomArts Cultural Center, 934 Brannan St., San Francisco. Admission is free. Panel discussion Thursday, 1:30 p.m. More information: somarts.org, and stationmuseum.com/Made_In_Palestine/Made_In_Palestine.htm.

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