

# Palestinian Visual Arts (III) Explorers(1965-1995)

In the wake of the 1967 war, many Palestinians were displaced and the population in the West Bank and Gaza fell under Israeli military occupation. Despite a protracted struggle for self-determination, Palestinians' national aspirations have remained unfulfilled. Wherever they lived, emerging Palestinian artists have sought to articulate their personal predicament in relation to the collective dream of regaining their homeland.

Palestinian artists who grew up in Arab countries generally remained on the periphery of local cultures. However, after the establishment of the Union of Palestinian Artists in 1969, group exhibitions of works by Palestinian artists traveled throughout the Arab world and abroad. Photo silkscreens by Layla Shawwa (b. 1940), stylized engravings by Abd al-Rahman Muzayyin (b. 1943), and experimental paintings by Imad Abd al-Wahhab (b. 1950) represented the leading innovative trends.

Jordan, which was the haven for several consecutive waves of Palestinian refugees, was a home for a number of Palestinian artists whose work also helped mold the character of Jordanian art: Fatima al-Muhibb (b. 1931), Ahmad Nawash (b. 1934), Afaf Arafat (b. 1938), Samia Zaru (b. 1940), Mahmoud Taha (b. 1942), Suha Shoman (b. 1944), Aziz Amura (b. 1945), and Fu'ad Mimi (b. 1949).

Palestinians under military occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were confined to a cultural ghetto. Insulated from the Arab world, a new generation of trained and untrained artists emerged: Karim Dabbah (b. 1937), Taysir Sharaf (1937–2001), Nabil Anani (b. 1943), Kamil Mughanni (b. 1944), Vera Tamari (b. 1945), Fathi Ghabin (b. 1947), Isam Badr (1948–2003), Sliman Mansur (b. 1948), Taysir Barakat (b. 1959), Fatin Tubasi (b. 1959), Samira Badran (b. 1959), and Yusif Duwayk (b. 1963). In 1973, the group established the League of Palestinian Artists,

whose exhibitions were the first group manifestation of Palestinian art on native soil.

Under military occupation, such exhibitions constituted a new form of political resistance. Located in schools, town halls, and public libraries, art exhibitions had a transformative effect, becoming a community event that drew ever-larger crowds from all segments of society. Because Palestinian art was an expression of collective identity, Israeli authorities began to impose military censorship on all exhibitions. Even the combined use of the four colors that made up the Palestinian flag was banned, and an attempt to establish a local gallery was aborted. Unauthorized exhibitions were stormed by troops, with the public ordered to leave and paintings confiscated. Palestinian artists were often subjected to interrogation and arrest. The harsher the measures enforced, the more politically empowered the artists became. Eventually their plight aroused the protest of some Israelis and numerous international nongovernmental groups.

The untutored Fathi Ghabin is one artist whose paintings made him a political celebrity within his community. Born in Gaza, Ghabin painted as an intuitive by-product of his daily involvement with community activities protesting the state of siege. Full of popular cultural symbols, Ghabin's narrative art led to his repeated incarceration. His painting of his seven-year-old nephew, who was shot dead at a demonstration, led to his incarceration for six months for having painted the child dressed in the forbidden colors of the Palestinian flag. Upon his release, Ghabin painted the image of a mass demonstration. Above the demonstrators, the sky is framed by two raised arms from which hang broken chains. Between the raised arms, a white horse, wrapped in the flag, gallops into the sky. Among the miniature faces of the demonstrators is the face of Ghabin himself.

Whereas Ghabin's work represents a vernacular art, the work of Taysir Barakat, another Gaza artist, expresses a more personal narrative. Barakat

was born and raised in a refugee camp and went on to study in Alexandria. He paints hazy forms in pastel shades that evoke a web of allegorical associations. A rooster announces sunrise to a violet sky; the sun turns into a golden ball for camp playmates; fledgling doves nap in their nest, with a barefoot child flying at twilight over the camp's barren earth.

The devastating effects of military occupation and the systematic policies of repression were central to the works of a Palestinian woman who received her art education in Alexandria and Florence before settling in Barcelona. Samira Badran was born in Tripoli, where her refugee father, master craftsman Jamal Badran, went to teach Islamic crafts. Two years after the family reentered the West Bank, the region was invaded by Israel. Badran's imagery is inspired by apocalyptic visions. Spread with whirling flames in lush colors, Badran's painting is full of odd machinery pieces, twisted steel cogs, spikes, barrels, and clogged wheels. The fragmentary debris and inanimate objects of destruction are scattered among dismembered human limbs. The only living beings are caged, strapped, or muzzled.

Sliman Mansour was born in Birzeit. He was the only well-known Palestinian artist to study at Bezalel. Mansour's work, which is full of metaphoric imagery, oscillates between photographic realism and a quasi-abstract style. For example, in one figurative work, a rainbow pours through the bars of a prison window; once inside, the rainbow breaks into the colors of the national flag. Mansour's abstractions explore color and earthy textures. Their titles indicate that they represent traces of the ancestral villages that were demolished and whose names were wiped off Israeli maps.

A new generation of artists also arose among Palestinian citizens of Israel: Abid Abidi (b. 1942), Walid Abu Shaqra (b. 1946), Khalil Rayyan (b. 1946), As'ad Azi (b. 1954), Da'ud al-Hayik (b. 1955), Kamil Daw (b. 1956), Asim Abu Shaqra (1961–90), Bashir Makhul (b. 1963), and Ibrahim Nubani (b.

1964).

Born in Haifa, Abidi worked as a blacksmith and illustrated Arabic publications that appeared in Israel. After studying in Dresden, Abidi became the first Palestinian to build monumental art on native soil. His allegorical monuments in Galilee, honoring human fortitude and resistance, include a narrative mural depicting Elijah's defiance and survival and a bronze monument dedicated to six Palestinians who were shot to death on March 30, 1976 during protests of Israel's confiscation of Palestinian land in the Galilee. (The date has since been observed by Palestinians as Land Day.)

In contrast to the urban Abidi, Walid Abu Shaqra—born in Umm al-Fahm and a London art graduate—was possessed by his rural background. His engravings depict landscapes haunted by human absence and native displacement: an uprooted olive tree lying in the sun; a plowed field in the moonlight; bushes, thorns, and wildflowers growing in cracks of the remains of abandoned homes; cactus that once defined village borders, outlasting the villages that have been erased.

As Abu Shaqra expressed his closeness to the land, exiled Palestinian painters were creating an abstract art that represented their distance from it. These exiles include Jumana al-Husseini (b. 1932), Samia Halaby (b. 1936), Sari Khoury (1941–98), Vladimir Tamari (b. 1942), Kamal Boullata (b. 1942), Munira Nusseibeh (b. 1942), Samir Salama (b. 1944), Nasir al-Sumi (b. 1948), and Nabil Shehadeh (b. 1951).

Despite minimal contact, Halaby, Khoury, Tamari, and Boullata all share visual concerns that recall their common experience of exile. All four artists were born in Jerusalem. After Palestine's fall, Halaby and Khoury immigrated to the United States with their families; Halaby settled in New York and Khoury in Michigan. After Jerusalem's annexation, Tamari established his residence in Tokyo; Boullata lived between the United States, France and Germany.

Halaby's early abstractions explored the visual interplay of spatial ambiguities. Her paintings might be composed of cyclical helices or of repeated bands of straight diagonal lines. Color is applied in linear monochromatic stripes in precise transitional gradations. Contrasting areas of light and dark are elaborately interwoven. Undulations from each extremity meet and gradually fade into each other. Her work questions the notions of order and continuity.

Sari Khoury's work, by contrast, explores discontinuities, suggesting motion impeded within an ethereal void in which geometric forms abruptly break away or float off the picture's edge. These forms often allude to fragments of familiar shapes—a hint of sky, a window, a flying bird, a sleek highway, an obscure corner. Khoury's fusion of abstract forms and fragmented familiar shapes sometimes suggests a state of suspended animation; often it alludes to the passage between interior and exterior space, between the borders of captivity and deliverance.

Tamari's pastels and watercolors offer fluid layers of gleaming transparencies. Fading into a background often composed of improvisational spreads of paint, Tamari's amorphous forms recall the haphazard patterns of ancient walls. Prismatic colors filtering through his angular shapes glow with poignant contrasts that are reminiscent of being within a sanctuary and looking out through stained glass. Textured areas are generated by short, delicate brush strokes that emulate the manner in which Byzantine icon painters molded stylized form. Tamari's abstractions allude to the landscape, often presented in the form of a cross, simultaneously suggests Golgotha and his own personal home.

Boullata's early apprenticeship with Jerusalem icon painter Khalil Halabi had a marked effect on his development. For years, he was fascinated by the square, geometric rendering of Arabic script. He composed fragments of text from Christian and Muslim sources in translucent colors and angular shapes, creating mandalas of Arabic in which reading becomes

interchangeable with seeing. In his later acrylics, all association with script disappeared. Geometric compositions, still based on the square, were generated by doubling and dissecting quadrangles. The eye-crossing demarcations between inside and outside transcend simple reciprocities. Through geometry—whose Greek roots mean “measurement of land”—the exiled artist, half a world away from Jerusalem, relentlessly charts the transition from memory to imagination.

From the Jerusalem School of icon painters to the Jerusalem painters in exile, bridges connect Palestinian works of art, transcending the distance separating the artists. Discontinuities notwithstanding, Palestinian art in many locations continued to interweave the artist’s memory of place with the inspiring images retained from a communal culture.

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*Note: This Highlight is drawn from Kamal Boullata’s entry “Art” in Philip Mattar, ed. The Encyclopedia of the Palestinians (New York: Facts on File, 2005).*

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