

A New Retrospective Shows How Far Palestinian Art Has Come

The Walid Abu Shakra retrospective – being held simultaneously at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and in Umm al-Fahm – reflects the London-based artist's longings for his childhood.

[Ellie Armon Azoulay](#) Jan 14, 2012 7:19 PM

"Mintarat al-Batten," a retrospective showcasing the work of Palestinian artist Walid Abu Shakra, is one of the most fascinating political events in the history of Israel art in general and Palestinian art in particular. It is taking place simultaneously in two parts, in two locations: in the gallery established by the artist's brother Said 16 years ago in their hometown of Umm al-Fahm, and at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art.

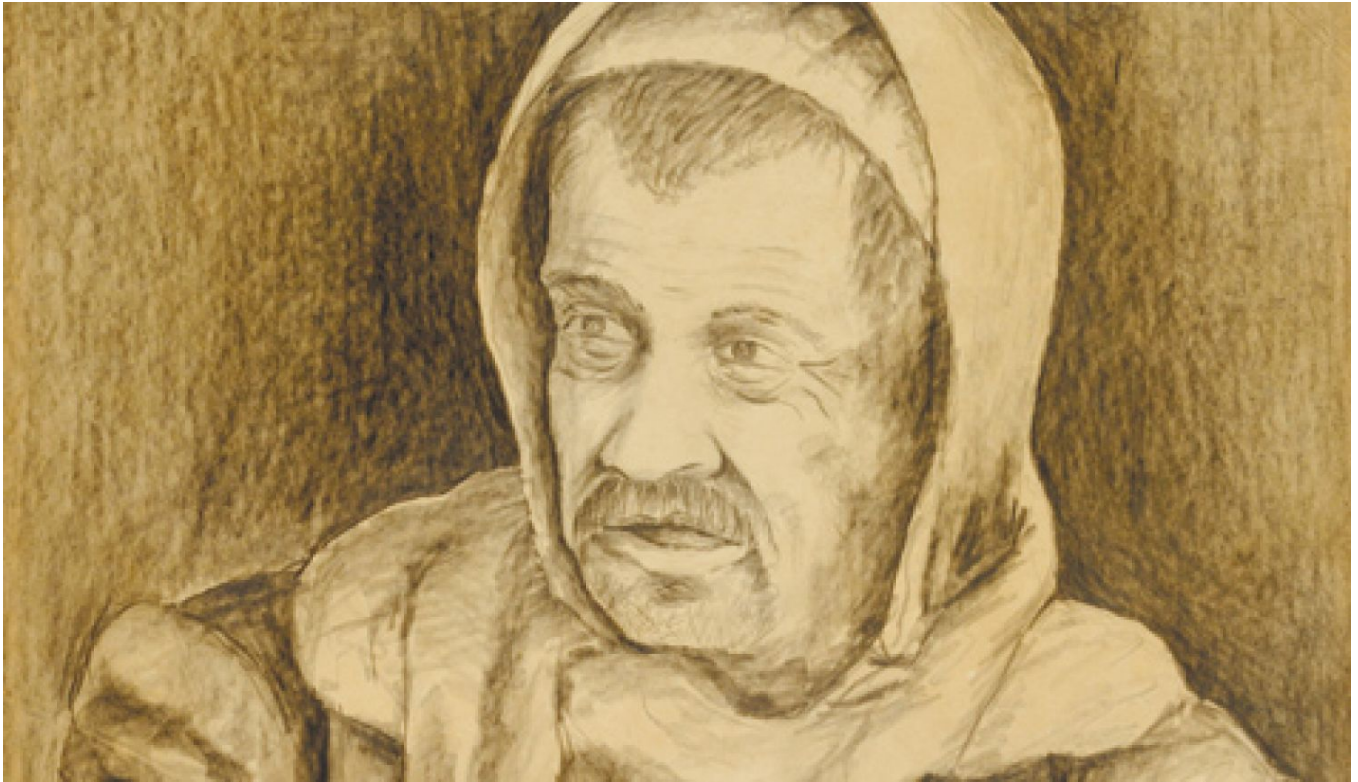
The first part of "Mintarat al-Batten" opened a few weeks ago. It both represents the closing of a circle, and also places on the agenda the importance of the museum of Palestinian art that is slated to be built in Umm al-Fahm. The show in the Tel Aviv Museum, which opened on January 5, on the other hand, not only makes amends for something that should have been done long ago, but also constitutes an important promise that we hope will be kept: to continue to research and expose such key artists, and to exhibit the next generations of Palestinian art.



'View from Umm al-Fahm,' 1976

“A Palestinian, by essence, is made from the lost culture, from the dialectic relationship with memory and with the foreign culture on which he draws, and at the same time criticizes. The lost, expropriated time, like culture and as part of it, continues to exist in the consciousness and memory of life here and there, as if refusing to acknowledge the parting,” wrote Hanna Farah-Kufer Birim in the catalog of the exhibition “Men in the Sun” that he curated with Tal Ben Zvi about two years ago in the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art, which showcased 12 Palestinian artists.

Walid Abu Shakra was born in Umm al-Fahm in 1946, and subsequently moved to England, where he has lived for over three decades. Although he says he has thrived on the bright gray light and the heavy fog there, he adds that he feels he never really left Umm al-Fahm, which has been at the heart of his work all these years.



'My Uncle Yusuf,' 1967

When asked about his hometown and his relationship with it, Abu Shakra expresses mixed feelings: a sense of longing when he is far away in cold England, and on the other hand, the realization from his many visits that there has been accelerated destruction of the familiar landscape. The shattering of a dream.

Abu Shakra's exhibition is called "Mintarat al-Batten." Al-Batten is one of the central hills in the Umm al-Fahm area which, due to its strategic location, became the site of a watchtower (mintarat) overlooking the surrounding fields and farms. "For us, the members of the Abu Shakra family, Mintarat al-Batten has tremendous personal symbolic meaning," explains Said. And Walid adds: "As a child I spent hours there, days and nights. You could see the rising and setting of the sun and the moon there."



'My Mother in the Kitchen,' 1970

As opposed to his first and only exhibition in the city 40 years ago, in the local council building – which was attended only by a few people aside from family members – several hundred people attended the opening of the new show at the gallery.

“It was like a festival for me,” says Abu Shakra excitedly. “I hope that what I am trying to give here will influence them – that all my friends, family and residents of the village who came to see the work will show more love and seriousness in their attitude toward the landscape that remains in the village.”



'Composition,' 1971

On display in the gallery are drawings, paintings and etchings by Abu Shakra, which range from the early years of his career in the 1960s to a new series of prints that he created as an artist's album, in a limited edition. In the Tel Aviv museum, on the other hand, only etchings are on show.

The exhibition in Umm al-Fahm tells the story of the artist and his career, as well as the story of the city. It focuses on various aspects in the landscape, both alive and abandoned: the view from al-Batten, olive groves in bloom alongside felled trees, prickly pears and plowed fields. Occasionally one can see vestiges of old abandoned stone houses, swallowed up by the general landscape. He also makes you feel you are present in the place for which the work is named.

Farid Abu Shakra, who is curating the two exhibitions (in Tel Aviv together with Irith Hadar), explains: "Abu Shakra's works use names that the locals use among themselves: 'Mintarat al-Batten,' 'Hashem's Garden,' 'Al-Minjara Area,' and so on. On the one hand the artist wanted to introduce his country, its beauty and magic to a foreign audience. On the other he

wanted to express the original names of the places, the buildings, the fields and the vineyards where he spent his childhood, as though just by uttering these names he is inhaling the air of the homeland, the fragrance of jasmine and his longing for the past.”

The seed of the retrospective was planted 15 years ago, when the late Prof. Mordechai Omer, veteran curator and director of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, visited the Abu Shakra home in Umm al-Fahm. Not much happened during that visit. But four years ago, Omer visited Farid in his studio in the artists' workshops in Herzliya. Their relationship developed and they began meeting regularly. After a year and a half of visits and trips, Omer asked Farid to make some suggestions for shows. “My first suggestion to him was a retrospective for Walid,” recalls Farid.

Walid and his brothers regretted that Omer passed away before the opening of the show. Indeed, he had had complete confidence in Farid and even agreed to hold the exhibition simultaneously in Umm al-Fahm. Farid and Said compiled an outstanding exhibition catalog designed by Palestinian designer Wael Wakim, which begins in Arabic.

‘Part of all of them’

Walid Abu Shakra, along with Abed Abdi, who is four years his senior, and Bashir Abu-Rabia, were the first Palestinian artists to study in Israeli schools, and eventually went abroad. Their choices and their daring paved the way for the younger generations.

In the catalog for “Men in the Sun,” Antoine Shalhat writes about the cultural consequences of the occupation, and the expulsion of Arab villages in 1948: “Among the victims of that war were a group of artists and intellectuals, including quite a few authors and poets, playwrights and painters, who had already achieved a considerable reputation. However, the greater part of those remaining were peasants, concentrated in their villages. This distribution indicates something about the meaningful

changes undergone by the socioeconomic structure of the Palestinian community remaining in Israel, but also about what this change meant for the community's culture and art, implications that we can compare to the outcomes of a particularly strong earthquake.”

For his part, Walid began drawing in kindergarten for himself and later became the “class artist.” Afterward he attended a high school in Afula, where an art-history class brought him to the point of no return, as he puts it. When he was 16-years-old, his father went bankrupt and Walid had to leave school to help support the family. He went to Tel Aviv, lived in a little shack in Jaffa with his cousin, and worked at three jobs simultaneously: In the early morning he worked in a bakery; at noon in a pizzeria; and in the evenings at a restaurant on Dizengoff Street. He remembers the period as extremely difficult: “I remember huge mice running under my broken-down bed.”

That year, 1964, he was contacted by an acquaintance who told him there was a position open for a tax official in Hadera; he submitted a request and was accepted.

“During the period when I worked there, I lived in a rented room in the home of Fania and Aryeh Kochok, a wonderful couple who were like parents to me, and I took art courses with Yoram Rozov. I also traveled to Haifa once a week to study at Beit Hagefen (the Arab Jewish Cultural Center).”

Meanwhile, Abu Shakra's passion for painting became stronger by the day. He registered at the Avni Institute of Art and Design in Tel Aviv, and studied with Yaakov Wechsler, Moshe Propes, Avshalom Okashi, Yehezkel Streichman and others.

“The socialization process undergone by Palestinian artists who study in Israeli academic institutions displays several post-colonial characteristics: first, the language of study – Hebrew – forces the artist to develop his/her creative modes of expression in a foreign linguistic setting; second, the

curricular habitus – its cultural and artistic context – is firmly anchored between the Western and the Israeli art worlds, excluding the Palestinian artist's culture; third, being a national field, despite its universalist aspiration, the Israeli art field tends to regard Palestinian artists as 'other,'" wrote Tal Ben Zvi in the catalog for "Men in the Sun."

Abu Shakra: "I didn't think too much about the aspects of who and what. I felt I was a part of all of them. I liked my teachers, they were good, every one of them gave me something." Still, he adds, he never gave up the local habitus – the cultural and artistic characteristics that he is closest to. Even later on, when he used abstraction, which was then of course the Israeli bon ton, he preserved certain prominent Palestinian cultural elements.

Community life

"The abstract works created by Walid Abu Shakra when he finished his studies at the Avni Institute, which are full of life's tribulations and the difficulties of supporting a family of seven, were mandatory," writes Farid in the catalog of the present exhibition.

At the gallery show, one can see the transition from the quick drawings executed in Nablus, Acre, Beit She'arim and Jenin, in which he focused on urban motifs, to abstract and geometrical structures and forms – while at the same time the artist maintained structural shapes identified with mosques, arches and minarets.

"I was attracted by the elements, the shapes in the windows, the adornments, and with them I created new compositions and preserved Middle Eastern color," the artist explains.

As opposed to his colleagues at Avni and the dominant artistic trend during those years, Abu Shakra did not stop dealing with the concrete, with his immediate surroundings. In addition to the landscape of Umm al-Fahm, he described life there as well.

Says his brother Said: “The days when we walked around together in the courtyards of Umm al-Fahm to photograph and document everything are etched in me. With his camera he captured community life, the marvelous childhood of the neighborhood children, the elderly of the community and everything that created the local culture of that time. He captured the human experience, which has been preserved to this day thanks to his work.”

Walid Abu Shakra and his English girlfriend lived in Hadera for a while, and his work was exhibited in group shows in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. “In 1972 I participated in a group exhibition in Gallery 220 in Tel Aviv and sold a painting to a family in Holon. With that money I was able to travel to Europe. We went for six months and toured various places, met my partner’s parents in England and decided to get married. I entered Saint Martin [London’s Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design] with a portfolio of drawings and several etchings I had done in Avni with my teacher Tuvia Beeri, and they accepted me for two years. I returned to Israel with a letter from them and received a stipend from the Education Ministry.”

Abu Shakra says it wasn’t easy for the family to accept his emigration. “Before I left I gave the family enough money for a certain amount of time, so there would be no obstacles for me to deal with. My mother was good and understanding, but my father was more skeptical.”

In London, however, Abu Shakra flourished: He didn’t stop working and participating in exhibitions in England and Europe, he became a member of the Precious Metal Clay Guild, the British Printing Society and the Royal Society of British Artists. In 1974 he and his family moved to Weybridge, Surrey; he purchased a printing press and installed a workshop in his home.

“Sometimes it was hard to live far away. I missed Mother and my siblings, I came to visit, for several months each time,” he says now.

When his children (now in their thirties) were born, it became more difficult to visit. In general, Abu Shakra says, “Every time I came the disappointment was greater. Every year I would come with money to build a house here, and because of the changes in the place I would return empty-handed.”

After a long time in England, far from home, he says he found consolation in the writings of Nazim Al-Haqqani and other prominent Sufi figures. He became so involved in reading these works that he set his art aside. Walid is not the only Sufi in the family, incidentally; his paternal grandmother also was, and had a great influence on him. “She was a special woman, blind, her hands were blessed,” he says warmly.

“I’m not a fanatic. It was exactly what I wanted. It wasn’t that I had planned to stop the art, it’s just that sometimes there’s a container and you can only put as much water in it as it can hold. Apparently the place in my heart was filled with spirituality; I wanted to find more within myself. I didn’t know how to express myself, and Sufism gave me the answer. For me Sufism is a way of life. To be a person with a big heart.”

But his affair with art was not completely over. When his mother fell ill and was on her deathbed she turned to him. “She didn’t talk much, she wasn’t the type to give orders and tell people what to do. She was quiet and full of love. We understood her without words. When I came to visit her, she asked me to return to art. Apparently at the time I was also ready to do that.”