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[Jerusalem Post](#)

Artists lifting the veil

The country's first contemporary Arab art exhibition in a museum raises quiet questions about Arab identity while shaking up the local art world.

By LAUREN GELFOND FELDINGER OCTOBER 2, 2008 15:48



Mervat Essa 88 224
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After their first three boys were stillborn, the Azi family prayed to the Druse prophet Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, to ward off the evil eye. The superstition that the angel of death was plucking the young boys of the family led the bereaved parents to dress their fourth son, Asad, as a girl from his birth until age six. Today, rough paintings of a young girl with feminine accessories are actually portraits of the male artist as a young child. Such complex issues of identity are the subject of an exhibition of 13 local Arab artists now at the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem. Metaphorically speaking, the show is

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brushing off the dust at the museum, which previously primarily displayed Islamic antiquities, classical works and ethnography. "It's about time for the museum to

anomaly, dedicated to Islamic art, yet run by a Jewish staff, funded by a Jewish endowment and located in a Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. The late philanthropist Vera Frances Bryce Salomons of England established the museum with an endowment fund in 1974, and named it in honor of a Hebrew University professor of art and architecture whom she admired. A reflection of the ongoing conflicts, the museum has traditionally had trouble raising additional moneys from the Muslim, Arab or Jewish communities. When guest curator Farid Abu-Shakra was invited to organize the exhibition with free rein, he also made local art history, marking the first time an Arab curator put together a contemporary art show in an Israeli museum. Abu-Shakra brought in primarily Muslim artists, but expanded the framework to include Christian, Druse and Beduin artists. The theme, "Correspondence," addresses the Arabs' rapport with local traditions, religion and personal experiences on one side, and Jewish neighbors, Israeli law and the canon of Western art and society on the other, creating an identity of insider and outsider, both as artists and citizens. "Arab artists have thoughts that are not only about politics," says Abu-Shakra. "We are also interested in social and personal areas, like all artists. But there are not many doors open to Arab artists." Indeed, until Abu-Shakra pulled this exhibition together, no Israeli museum has had an exhibition exclusively dedicated to contemporary local Arab art. Museums do hold Arab works in their collections and have had select solo exhibitions. While there are no clear responses to why there have been no group shows, there are a number of factors that likely play a role. Museum curators choose labels for works to determine where they should be housed and displayed, and tend not to consider local Arab works separately from other contemporary local works. Palestinian artists living abroad might have their works grouped with the international art collections. There are also fewer opportunities to study and display art in the Arab communities and so less involvement in the art world. But there is obviously also a political element, since many Arab artists want to be recognized as being Israeli citizens, and yet having their unique heritage and point of view that sets their work and identity apart. "I studied in Tel Aviv, I work in Herzliya; it's incredibly fun to straddle two cultures. But I am a citizen of Israel and an Arab artist in Israel, I am not Israeli. I can't be Israeli. That means being Jewish and a Zionist," Abu-Shakra says. Many Arab artists who face similar identity conflicts may be hesitant to have their work labeled as "Israeli art," curators have confided. But says Abu-Shakra, "Museums need to open up." AT THE EXHIBITION, a unique Arab visual language is apparent in a number of the works. The first works seen at the entrance are Mervat Essa's etched clay flat breads, referencing the traditional Arab breads, like pita and lafa, in colors reminiscent of the parched desert earth at sunset. Patterns within recall antiquities that have captured images in mud. Huda Jammal's colorful mixed-media paintings borrow images and textures from traditional Palestinian embroidery and put them into a contemporary context, breaking from

the rigidity of embroidery patterns and traditional female roles. Buthina Abu-Milhen's series "The needle vanquishes the sewer" also mixes traditional

Arabic-speaking viewer, who is not privy to translation. Khader Oshah's "The Family" series, for example, shows portraits on lavishly calligraphied white animal hide. The writing is selections from Palestinian poems. In the installation and video "Love Letter," a man with fingernails chewed low is picking petals off psychedelic daisies, in contrast to images of some ghastly skin disease, alluding to the high pleasure principle in contrast to the nearly flesh-eating pain of first love (and no, not to herpes, though it certainly gives that impression). The installation part also includes reams and reams of papers with Arabic writing, dramatically teasing the non-Arabic-speaker to know what the love letters say, that they can be written with so much seeming passion and to fill up so many thousands of pages. The works that deal with more political themes are gentle and subtle. Eight photos by Ahlam B'soul also capture Arab structures and abandoned or seized areas that are now inhabited by Jews. The works feel adoring, sad and longing, rather than angry. The delicately etched copper engravings of Walid Abu-Shakra - the curator's oldest brother - show local landscapes that are at once romantic and yet signify a certain decay. For example, an almond tree is dry and bent, like an elderly man walking against the wind. In the personal works of Asad Azi, being dressed as a girl to ward off the angel of death did influence his identity, but not in a negative way. It only added another dimension of gentleness, he wrote. THE ABU-SHAKRA family is prominent on the local art scene. Farid, the curator, teaches at Oranim College and is known as an artist and teacher in the Arab community. The Ministry of Education has awarded him the Keren Sharett young artist award and the teacher-artist award. His middle brother, Said, founded and runs the Umm el-Fahm art gallery in Wadi Ara, which showcases local Arab and Jewish works. He is also working to establish the first contemporary Arab art museum in the country in Umm el-Fahm, a project supported in principle by the minister of education. Their cousin Asim Abu-Shakra, who died of cancer in 1990, was also an established artist. Farid is hoping that his latest exhibition will open new doors for audiences and artists. Some 8,000 visitors came to the museum in the first seven weeks, which, according to museum official Avishai Yarkoni, was significantly higher than the number of visitors that came to the museum in the same period last year. *The "Correspondence" exhibition of 13 contemporary Arab artists at Jerusalem's L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art is slated to run until the end of December.*

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