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The Palestinian Sabra: After His Death, an Artist's Legacy Is Up for Grabs

After dying of cancer at the young age of 29, Asim Abu Shaqra's work was received as part of the canon of Israeli art. A new book and exhibition offer a different angle on the Israeli Arab artist.

Eitan Buganim | [Send me email alerts](#)

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The life story of Asim Abu Shaqra, one of the few Palestinian artists accepted into the canon of Israeli art who died a young man, was and remains one of a struggle for ownership – economic, political and symbolic – and of self-determination. Not of his own wishes, Abu Shaqra traveled the unavoidable path of conflicts between his Arab identity and his Israeli one; between contemporary art in the Tel Avivian big city and familial expectations and the feelings of belonging that accompany them. Between his insistence on universalist art and the immediate identification of his works as carrying the banner of the national resistance.

The political conflicts that stuck to his short career were not resolved after his death. The two sides, Israeli and Palestinian, may have proudly appropriated the artist and his legacy, but each one of them claims precedence, mostly when it comes to the image most identified with the artist – the sabra (cactus) plant.

Even though, and possibly because of his death from cancer in 1990 before he had even turned 29, Abu Shaqra has become a milestone in the history of Palestinian and Israeli art.

name. On the Jewish-Israeli side, there was a memorial exhibition in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem in 1991, a retrospective in the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion for Contemporary Art in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art in 1994, an exhibition in the Golconda Fine Art gallery in Tel Aviv in 2008 and a few group exhibitions that included Abu Shaqra's work.

This month, a book about him was published by the Italian publisher Charta, edited by Nira Itzhaki. The book, written in English, was launched last week at the Chelouche Gallery in Tel Aviv alongside an exhibition of his work. The book offers new interpretations on Abu Shaqra's paintings by three eminent art scholars: Tal Ben-Zvi, Kamal Boullata and W.J.T. Mitchell, and includes an introduction by Itzhaki and a "moving preface" by the Israeli-Arab poet and writer Anton Shammas.

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"One weaves the landscape of one's homeland into being, and whenever Asim painted the sabra he was in effect creating a self-portrait tethered to Palestinian iconography," wrote Itzhaki about Abu Shaqra.

Both threatening and threatened

Abu Shaqra was born on November 11, 1961 in Umm al-Fahm, the seventh of 10 children. In the religious Muslim family in which he grew up, painting was not such an unusual thing. His cousin, Walid Abu Shaqra, paved way for the family in the world of art.

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"We saw in Walid a model for imitation," reminisces Walid's brother, Said Abu Shaqra, an artist and director of the Umm el-Fahm Art Gallery. Said founded the gallery along with another artist in the family, Farid Abu Shaqra.

But unlike his younger brothers, Walid chose to leave Israel for London, where he has lived for the past 30 years. Sheikh Raed

“Asim was endowed with the same talents that Raed Saleh was endowed with, the same characteristics of uniqueness. They both searched for a way to be special,” says Said, adding that Asim loved to draw and paint when he was a child.

Asim studied in elementary school in Umm al-Fahm, but in high school he went to study in Afula at his parent’s request. At one stage, because of social distress, he asked to return home. “It was always that way: the desire to return to the protected and familiar place,” he told Ronit Matalon in an interview before the opening of his second solo exhibition in 1989. “Even now when I am sitting in a familiar coffee shop, in the neighborhood where I have lived for quite a few years in Tel Aviv, and I have an expectation inside that maybe something will happen. I don’t know, maybe foreignness. Maybe both threatening and also being threatened. Not belonging.”

In 1981 he moved to Tel Aviv and began studying at the Kalisher Art Academy. He quickly realized that his poverty and Arab background made it difficult to rent an apartment in the big city, and found himself on a mattress in a crowded room packed with construction and restaurant workers. At the same time he worked for a living washing dishes, while the tuition at Kalisher was covered by a scholarship. Later the director of the school, Zvi Ben Dov, put him up in a room at the school.

For almost two years Abu Shaqra lived in the school, most of the time in a sleeping bag – until the cancer was discovered. “I almost never left this small room with the turpentine for a year and a half. I don’t think that it came only from a lack of choice. I chose it,” he said.

At the hospital, they connected his outbreak of cancer to his lengthy stay in the small room that also served as a studio for painting. Everyone who knew him, even until now, describes a modest and joyful person, someone special. “Quiet, hidden, shy but talented like a devil,” said Ben Dov.

But even during his studies he was singled out as a promising artist.

In 1994, only four years after his death, the foreignness, crowding and turpentine fumes among which Abu Shaqra created his works became part of the myth of the noble wild man and totally expressive artist who gave everything to his art, including, it seems, his life. This same myth is embodied very well in the texts written about his pictures, which have over time turned into very profitable objects.

Said Abu Shaqra testifies to this: “I am very sorry that the works are not with us, since they were all sold. On one hand they have value, but on the other hand we have been disinherited from the right to own them. As a Palestinian who wants to exhibit his culture, I no longer have the possibility. I need to ask permission from the owners.”

Ithaki wrote: “Asim, who never went beyond the borders of this country, was a man of this place. He was always connected to the local culture, environment and aesthetics, whether in Tel Aviv or Umm al-Fahm. He took the sabra – a Palestinian symbol – with him to Tel Aviv and never stopped painting it. In the last two years of his life, as he was struggling with a malignant disease, Asim painted, over and over again, the sabra plant uprooted from its natural

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Asim Abu Shaqra

'Sabra,' 1988.

The cover of Asim Abu Shaqra's book.

One of Asim Abu Shaqra's works.

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