

A Review of the Book "Palestinian Art"

Part II: Correcting Misconception and Ignorance

To return to Part I of this review [click here](#).

Review by Samia A. Halaby, August 25, 1998. Edited February 2011.

(An exhibition of the work of seven Palestinian artists was presented by the Swedish Government at the Konstakademien Vastra Galleriet (Royal Academy of Art) in Stockholm from August 17 through September 20th, 1998. It was accompanied by a hard-cover book titled "Palestinian Art." Mr. Ulf Thomas Moberg was both curator of the show and author of the book. No publisher is specified in the book, but it was printed by Almqvist & Eiksell, Uppsala 1998, copyright Cinclus, Box 14089, 161 14 Stockholm.)

The educational intention of the organizers of the exhibition, as I was given to understand, is to increase mutual understanding by presenting the art of Palestinian Arabs to the European community, during this year when Stockholm is designated the cultural capital of Europe. The artists in the exhibition thank The Royal Academy, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swedish International Development Agency, and very specially Ulf Thomas Moberg for this commendable effort. And in the spirit of mutuality I wish to present some reflections of the cultural traditions of Arab artists.

In Part I, the book was described and evaluated. This Part II provides the proper conceptual basis for discussion of the subject of Palestinian Arab art. Such material was completely absent in the book, "Palestinian Art," where propaganda was more the intention than an art historical treatise.

As a writer, painter, and participant in the exhibition of Palestinian Art, I know that an exhibition needs a curator with a good eye as much as it

needs a commentator with an intimate understanding of the artwork and its sources. And indeed this show of Palestinian Arab art is well curated by Mr. Thomas Moberg. But an understanding of the artwork and its sources was lacking. The installation of the work in the Royal Academy's galleries with natural lighting is was of high quality. To Mr. Moberg goes substantial credit for the immense task of compiling and bringing this exhibition to fruition and for publishing the accompanying book.

I find that important things have not been presented by the book which accompanies this exhibition; while things that are of no significance to Arabic art or to Arab artists receive focus. Furthermore, the goal as stated in the book is to show how Palestinian Arab artists have assimilated international trends and how in spite of this their art is distinctly Palestinian and of course, by logical extension, distinctly Arab though that local conclusion is never stated. This goal, clearly proclaimed in the book, remains unfulfilled. It is as though stating it gives permission to disregard it. For these reasons I extend a helping hand to the viewer, the critic, and the scholar in approaching and understanding our work. I do so based on my membership in this ancient culture of The Arab World as much as on my studies of the history of art.

We Palestinians are Arabs and part of a large aggregation of historical cultures dating from prehistoric times and spreading in mutual cultural exchange with regions as far east as India and as far west as Spain. As modern Arabs we are just as aware of our myriad ancestry as we are of the complex modern world we now live in. We are Arabs distinguished by our language and our history and we count among us adherents to many religions and origins.

Contrary to European art historical views of us, we do not separate ourselves from the ancient peoples which were our progenitors. We the Palestinian Arab artists have roots in the pictorial and cultural traditions of the Mediterranean basin including ancient Lebanon (Phoenicia), ancient

Iraq (Assyria), and ancient Egypt; and we share this history in mutual interaction with our ancient neighbors in Iran (Persia), Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, and Crete. Our ancestors were the earliest creators of writing and picture making.

In Western Art history more than several hundred different names are used to describe the various arts of our ancestors. Some of these names are religious while others are geographic. These myriad names create the illusion that we as Arabs are different from our ancestors. Concomitantly, modern historians apply to us their own theories of ethnicity calling us by their own labels avoiding the correct international identification of Arabic speaking people as Arabs. The result is that they try to alienate us from our history.

This method of labeling us creates the illusion that we, as Arab artists, belong to various disenfranchised minorities now seeking to rejoin the art world by imitating modern Western painting. That is precisely nothing more nor less than an illusion, the falsehood of which is amply contradicted by the artwork in the exhibition.

During the Middle Ages an unusual Arab art of pictorial abstraction developed from the various currents of our ancient ancestors. We intuitively and intellectually know the depth and breadth of our pictorial history including both medieval geometric abstraction as well as the ancient traditions of illusionism. Our present art is based on this knowledge combined with our awareness of the international nature of contemporary art.

It is an error to think that we borrowed the art of picture making from Europe or the West generally. It has been part of our heritage from ancient of times. Stockholm has a precious and sizable collection of art housed in many museums. Residents and visitors to the city can go to the Medelhavsmuseet (Museum of Mediterranean Art) at Fredsgatan 2 and examine in case D of room 2 of the Egyptian section the amazing pot

labeled Negadeh II culture. On it is painted one of the earliest pictures of all mankind. It is an amazing testament from five and a half millennia before our present time. Viewers can easily notice the connection between the imagery on this ancient pot and those of the contemporary paintings of Tayseer Barakat which are on view only a few blocks away at our exhibition at the Royal Academy of Art.

Tayseer Barakat

The history of Arabic art is clearly and dramatically visible in the work of Tayseer Barakat. The rows of symbols of ancient Egyptian, Iraqi, Jordanian (Nabatean), Palestinian (Canaanite) art are reborn in the pictures shown at this exhibition. The Swedish visitor to the exhibition might remember what they studied of ancient Egyptian pictures and see most clearly these sources in the work of Barakat. What the visitors may not know so intimately are the many ancient arts of Palestine and the surrounding area which form a solid base of this modern art. Barakat presents to the viewer rows and compartments full of symbols most of which are flat simplified images of the human figure. The eye of the viewer travels from part to part wondering what is contained and what the images signify. The wonderment of ancient art is coupled with the realities of our time. In the work titled *Three Women*, 1992, we are moved when we see the female figures which are windblown and seem burnt can yet stand alive and solid as rock. These images remind me of the monumental heads of Easter Island as much as of the ancient figures of Egypt and Palestine. I also see the simultaneity of being blown by burning sandstorms while standing solidly against the fire of the sand. I think of the condition as being supremely Palestinian, standing strong in the face of the exigencies of history and the tragedies of Zionist encroachments. We call it Al-Sumoud and it has a deeply poignant meaning which is Palestinian in quality and which evokes both pain and yearning.

In Barakat's work I also see the profound influence of the abstract art of

the medieval Arabs. Western historians like to describe these abstract pictures as Islamic decorations. They are in fact some of history's most sophisticated statements in the art of pictorial abstraction. The formal attributes of these abstractions are intimately part of Barakat's work. The compartments are much like the geometric cells which form the repeat patterns of Arabic Abstraction. The environmental nature of the formal boundaries of Arabic abstraction is a precursor to Barakat's various rectangles within rectangles which he uses as the formal ground for the compartments.

Tayseer Barakat has taken seriously the challenge presented by European misconception of the Arab World and has made a substantial effort to study the art of our ancestry and to do what seems monumental in the face of the modern world. That is, he wishes to develop his art strictly within Palestinian Arab tradition. Of course no one can succeed completely in such an endeavor. Citizens of Sweden might understand this when they consider how difficult it would be for their artists to move forward if they strictly limited their sources to the cultural history of Sweden.

Barakat is of course intellectually curious and thus in spite of this self-imposed limitation he is constantly absorbing the many currents in our modern world. But it is important to take note that in this regard Barakat is taking a stand which is inspiring to the youth of Palestine. And the young of Palestine will imitate his internationalism as much as they will imitate his constructive attitude of pride.

Tayseer Batniji

One such Palestinian Arab youth who admires Barakat is Tayseer Batniji. Batniji seems tired of the limitations of Gazze (Gaza) and wishes to broaden his experience and has exerted a huge effort to gain the opportunity to study in France. The economic strangulation of Gazze by

Israel has created near unbearable conditions of unemployment resulting in economic want and crowded living.

It is very hard to know how Batniji will develop since he is the youngest participant in this group show. He is just out of art school although he worked for a time as an independent artist. It is clear from his words that he is hungry to continue to learn as much as he can about everything. Works in the exhibition bespeak an interest in Post Modernist symbolism with an intended content extracted from Palestinian Arab life. His work is executed with brashness and power. This visual power allows us to quickly delight in its textures and thus directly enter into the work. One such work, *Baal-Composition*, 1997, focuses on a Palestinian myth.

Like Post Modernism generally, Batniji's works do not reveal their meaning visually. A verbal explanation is always necessary. The stars of international Post Modernism generally allow the critic the attractive position of interpreting the meaning of their work. This gives the critic a certitude which cannot be challenged by the work itself. However those who have not attained international stardom must explain the work themselves. Short of this explanation the work may be interpreted in any number of ways. This is a condition which the young artist needs to address.

For example the several panels which form the work, *La travesee du desert*, of 1997, may be interpreted differently by different viewers. Someone on the West Bank in Palestine might think that the vertical dark lines through the yellow ochre background symbolize barriers. Thus their meaning is the many closures the Israelis impose on the life of Palestinian Arab Communities. While someone in Japan might see these dark verticals as the pristine simplicity of how bamboo divides the air. And a visitor to New York galleries might say that it is formalism without subject matter. Multiple meaning and the dialogue it provokes may be precisely what is wanted by the artist. Yet despite the openness to interpretation

which is implicit in this work there remains a pictorial presence which allow it to stand on its own.

The work, *Sans titere*, 1998, is even more open to interpretation. To the uninitiated there is no hint of the intended content visible in the 24 rectangles which form the work. Before reading the explanation given to the author and presented in the book *Palestinian Art*, it appeared to be a simple group of soft rectangles rather than symbols of the culture of Palestinian Martyrs. Should the visual arts depend so completely on written explanation?

Rana Bishara

Rana Bishara is a young and energetic painter and installation artist working in several media. The most striking quality in her work at the exhibition is the decisiveness and assurance of her strokes. It bespeaks a certainty that is more often encountered in far more experienced artists. Visitors to the Dome of The Rock in Al-Quds (Jerusalem) will notice the similarity between the pictorial panels on the walls of this building to the work of Bishara. This is most apparent in the sensations of flatness as though the parts are inlaid one next to the other. The formal similarity is most visible in the delineation of boundaries. These masterful and bold strokes of Bishara's do not float in the white space of the paper -- rather they seem to be embedded in it. This analysis is confirmed by Bishara's use of script on the surface and at times near the edges of these shapes. The awareness of boundaries might also reflect the hostile encirclement of Palestinian communities by Israelis.

The doorway is another of the motifs that is prevalent historically in the Arabic art of abstraction and present in Bishara's work. In *Composition*, 1996, one notes that even the airy textures and the organic brush marks do not contradict the strength of boundaries. The image has a post and lintel motif aiding the sensation that the elements are architectural and

thus structurally separate from each other. The doorway can be a Mihrab (an architectural element which defines the direction of prayer for Moslems) as much as it is the entry to a private home. The doorway is a primary motif in the drawings of Palestinian Arab children. It is often topped by the typical semi-circular lunette of stained glass. In Bishara's work the doorway is topped by a triangular weight bespeaking the social nature of monumental stone architecture rather than the privacy of a single home.

Bishara also executes installation works which are overtly Palestinian Arab in their political content as they are intuitively Arabic in their history. She, like some other Palestinian Arab artists, is distinguished for her use of the leaves of the Prickly Pear plant which in Arabic is called Subair or Saber in plural. The singular form is called Sabra. In this usage, Bishara asserts that the words, Subair, Saber, and Sabra, are Arabic in language and Palestinian in tradition despite their use by foreigners. Her work also asserts that this land of her ancestry and her present life is hers even in the face of grave adversity. The bravery of her stand is magnificent.

Samia Halaby

The geometry of medieval Arabic abstraction in combination with the abstraction of twentieth century Constructivism is the basis of my work. In recent years I have found great inspiration in the soft abstraction of a few paintings by Maria Ender executed in Leningrad during the mid-twenties. Ender was a young student when these works were executed. I have seen them in exhibitions and reproduced in books.

What is difficult in this soft painterly abstraction is to avoid creating pointillist landscapes while maintaining the freedom of the brush mark from the creation of shape. In the narrow area between the two historical brackets, I have discovered a world of expression consisting of the rhythms and general principles of motion one sees in the world around us

-- both the world of nature as well as the human part of it. For example, I see similar principles at work in the movement of crowds of people as in the movement of leaves in the wind as in the turbulence patterns in water and I try to capture these principles in my paintings. My understanding of these general principles and my search for abstraction is illuminated by my studies of medieval Arabic abstraction.

Contrary to the first paragraph in the essay on my work in the book, Al-Quds (Jerusalem) is not "only a memory." There is now still our Arab Al-Quds. Its artistic crown, The Dome of The Rock, is still an inspiration in my work. And although Israelis have the power to prevent me from living in the city of my birth, I have visited it often in my adult life and I will do so again and again. I have made many paintings based on studies of the Dome of The Rock. It is a living reality which we seek to protect.

My wonderful memory of Al-Quds has nothing to do with European concepts of ethnic disharmony. When I described my memories which are partially quoted in the first paragraph in the chapter on my work, I described both the beauty of my childhood community and the disgust I feel at Israelis who steal our lands and homes and culture. I feel no guilt or shame in telling this truth which should not be hidden no matter how frightening it may be to some. How will we be judged by history if we fear to tell it?

Jumana El-Husseini

Jumana El-Husseini creates fields of space. They vibrate with her masterful handling developed over many years of distinguished practice. These fields are articulated through the use of marks which mostly stand for individual characters or script. These fields might be rectangular and frontal attenuated in the traditions of abstract space or they might be three dimensional fields articulated through the use of atmospheric perspective.

In the abstract ones some frontal fields possess ambivalent distance while others possess the stability of a writing surface. A field of blue may recede inspite of the letters etched at its edges. Those fields which are filled with scripts gain the illusion of the hardness of a writing surface. The interplay of surfaces depends on the incidence of written marks. Some slabs appear transparent, made so by the overlap of blocks of script.

Often a rhythm is played over the entire surface of the paintings independently of these rectangular fields. A fragment of script is bolder than the rest and catches the attention of the viewer. The viewer's eyes jumps from one such signal to another being led thereby into a structured perusal of the whole. The paintings reward careful contemplation with a wealth of overlapping patterns. As we jump from signal to signal we feel that we are driven into a world of written information and later, after we leave, we regret not having read the script.

In those paintings which create aerial perspective a sensation of floating is created by layers and layers of evenly distributed single characters. These single characters graduate in size from larger at the bottom of the picture to smaller at the top. The gradually diminishing size creates an aerial perspective. We thus feel that we are floating in an atmosphere of depth where we encounter various characters whose significance is less important than the promise thereof.

A romance with the beauty of written characters and script is often encountered in the work of Arab artists. Indeed it is also a part of the work of Rana Bishara in this exhibition. This beauty seems to have a rightness and a power which is greater than the work of an individual artist. At times we are just as deeply moved by script as we are by natural beauty. I believe that this is due to the social formulation of script. It is as though millions of artists over centuries have contributed to their refinement. They have been subjected to millennia of use and have grown more elegant as they grow more functional in their power to communicate.

The work of Hussein depends on the traditions of the calligraphic art in the Arab World. In this tradition art lover and artists share in mutual artistic challenge. The artist must be creative within certain norms while the lover must show her/his prowess in deciphering the script. The art lover is disappointed if the calligraphy is too easy to decipher or if the artist excessively stretches the rules of the art. Hussein like many contemporary Arab artists has initiated a new set of rules in regard to this exchange between art lover and artist. We are no longer expected as viewers to actually read the text but we are expected to apply our traditional experiences with abstraction to test if the work succeeds in its ambitions to create pictorial space through the manipulation of calligraphic form. Thus in Hussein's work the pictorial space of twentieth century abstraction combines with medieval Arabic abstraction and is delineated through calligraphic markings.

Samir Salamah

The paintings of Samir Salamah are abstract images which combine consciousness of twentieth century Cubism and abstract expressionism with the geometric divisions one sees in Arabic abstraction.

It seems that artists of the Arab World unconsciously express in their work the fitting of parts together to fill foreground space. The division of the surface into parts, all of which seem to have the outline of positive parts, is peculiar to their work. Shapes which imply by their outline that they are negative shapes are rare.

To understand what I mean, the viewer might create in their imagination a view of a tray full of small lumps of dough ready to bake. If the lumps are far enough apart they will each grow to be puffy and circular when they finish baking. When we look at the tray from above we will see circular shapes possessing positive outlines and we will see the tray behind them as negative background. If the small lumps of dough are very close to

each then as they puff-up in the baking they will push each other into a pattern of uneven squares thereby filling the entire space of the tray. The tray as background will not be seen and all the shapes will seem positive. It is just this sort of pattern that one sees in little villages where houses seem to adhere one to the other for safety and warmth. This quality is as much visible in medieval European village as it is in the villages of the Arab World. It is precisely this quality of fitting together and filling space that is seen in the painting by Salamah called Ma'lula, of 1974.

It is also this quality of fitting together and filling space which underlies the geometric abstractions of medieval Arabic art. Its geometry is a sophisticated and highly developed technology which is still the study of Crystallographers and scholars of Symmetry. It is also this quality of fitting parts together which we saw in both Barakat's work and in mine as well as in the recent landscapes of Salamah such as Ma'lula Garden, of 1998. In this painting each segment takes on a strong life of its own and a definite texture of its own. Each shape is carefully studied and seeks to move forward as a positive frontal shape. Some shapes have clear outlines and all have clear boundaries. Even the sky is a definite shape simplified into a triangle which has the power to move forward in our perception of space or to remain behind other parts. When all shapes have the nature of positive shapes then they have both the tendency of seeming to push forward as well as the tendency to be pulled back by the forward motion of neighboring shapes.

This power to change position in space and to see-saw back and forth creates the sensations of motion even while it seems to freeze the parts. In some of Salamah's works one senses that the textures have grown strong and the see-sawing action might soon create an artistic explosion of color and painterly life which will challenge the formal boundaries of the painting.

It does not enlighten us to read in the book of the exhibition about the

European history, Jewish or Crusader, which touches Salamah's birthplace. This is merely a small fragment of a larger history of the area dating back millennia. The imposition of this European fragment at the very start of the essay on Salamah's paintings has nothing to do with either his work or the inspiration of his work. In fact it is not even appropriate as history since it is fragmentary and misleading. It leaves the reader wondering about the reasons for such lack of focus.

Naser Soumi

Naser Soumi is most concerned at present with installation work. He has put heart and soul into the creation of works which pay homage to the cities of Palestine.

I was fortunate to examine the installation work of Soumi's at Darat Al-Funun in Jordan and to talk to Soumi about his work and to enjoy his collection of photographs of Yafa (Jaffa). With Soumi, I share the terror of watching our cities being razed and with it the incredible artistic and architectural history of Palestine. I wonder if citizens of Sweden would not feel a small part of our pain if they had to stand by helplessly watching foreigners tear down and bulldoze each and every building on the island of GAMLA STAN and then replace them with generic apartment buildings. A horror such as the one Swedes might feel creates the yearning and the pride at the base of the powerful creativity leading Soumi to make these homages to Palestinian cities. In the installation work as homage to Yafa, Soumi placed letters in Arabic and English from men and women who lived in Yafa and who write about their memories. This work of art and others like it have become a part of the process of healing and dealing with the monumental wounds created by the ongoing Israeli destruction of Palestinian Arab society. A dialogue on this issue continues among Palestinian Arab intellectuals of which Soumi is aware.

I lived in Yafa as a child and returned to it as an adult and produced also a

work on the subject which is available on the WORLD WIDE WEB. I would be thunderstruck if someone told me they will do an artistic critique of this work by telling of the history of a minority (Jewish Palestinians) which they confusedly associate with our oppressors -- the very oppressors who are destroying Yafa. Yet this is precisely what is done to Naser Soumi.

It is important to learn to make a distinction between Judaism and Zionism. It is a distinction which the book fails to make. Judaism is an ancient religion and Zionism is a recent political movement. Clearly not every Jew supports Zionism and most certainly not every Zionist is a Jew. Furthermore, Jews of the Arab World are Arabs not Israelis unless they expressly change their identity and their loyalty.

Soumi's work is not presented in the exhibition but some pictures are presented in the book. What is unfortunate in the book is the description of unrelated fragments of history which do not enlighten us about Soumi's work. These minuscule fragments of the history of Arab Jews and of the Crusaders in Palestine leave me as an artist feeling doubt about the implications of the book -- implications which may or may not be intended. Perhaps unintentionally they belong more to a political point of view which seeks to undermine us as Palestinian Arabs more than it seeks to enlighten the viewer about our artistic sources.

Vera Tamari

I have written before about Vera Tamari's work. This treatise is available on the WORLD WIDE WEB at <http://www.art.net/~samia>. Tamari has utilized photographs of her own family's life in Palestine prior to the imposition of the State of Israel and the beginning of our dispossession. These photographs have then been rendered into bas-relief panels which are often glazed or painted. Tamari also made bas-reliefs of the Palestinian landscape. They are constructed from many three dimensional pieces of sculpted clay. The pieces fit intimately together like birds huddling

together for warmth. The numerous parts are often fragile and thin. The pieces are assembled and mounted on a slab. Delight in the intimate fitting of parts to fill a ground is Arabic in its tendencies as explained above where the visual metaphor of a tray of buns was used.

These ceramic works are fragile and seem that way to the viewer. This quality is completely intended by Tamari and communicates a message which is unnerving. Tamari wishes to show us through this message the fragility she feels is the condition of Palestinian Arab life at the present time.

The new installation work by Tamari in this show is a wonderful increase in artistic power. Visitors to the exhibition to date have expressed admiration of this work. Fourteen ceramic masks float at various distances from a pictorial background made up of repeated reproductions of the Mediterranean shore of the city of Yafa. Tamari titles the work Oracle from the Sea, 1998. I was deeply moved by this work as a Palestinian who once lived in Yafa. I went to school there and recently visited the shores of Yafa and I found myself having to mentally cross the mountains of garbage which the Israelis continually dump on the sea shores of this city. I felt that the ancestors came back from the sea and came back to look at what has been done to Yafa. I felt that there was a promise in this, a connection, and the beauty of return of which we dream. I felt that it alleviated my loneliness and brought me back from strange distances.

The work is artistically whole even while Tamari tells that much more space is needed for this work and that the photographs should have been larger. The artist has given us a strong dose of her expressive powers. This power lies in the aggregate of the work, and in the content of its parts. The expressive power of the faces is substantial.

I cannot describe Tamari's work as Post Modernist as I did with Batniji. The message is clear and the power of the message collects and grows as we examine and remember it. Its sum is greater than the sum of the parts.

It is intentional in style and the scope of its subject is social even while it remains somewhat open to precise interpretation. In the book is reproduced a photograph of some of these masks taken against the background of the Mediterranean sea on the shores of Yafa at a recent date.

In conclusion I thank the author, Ulf Thomas Moberg, for undertaking the huge task of research and travel needed to assemble materials for both the exhibition and the book. The work was done with humor and tenderness. He brings to the book many sweet passages of Palestinian Arab life both social and cultural. Moberg deserves a lot of credit for his courage in doing so on the artistic stage of one of Europe's most distinguished nations. In this he is singular. His admirable determination has allowed him to fulfill a dream which started when as a youth he visited Palestine and began collecting political posters seeing their historical value long before others did.

My views differ vastly from his in regard to the history of Palestine and its current political reality. Implicit to the text is the misconception that Zionist Israel may exist in Palestine due to Crusader and Jewish history even while Israel's past and current actions seek to extinguish us. Palestine is Arab and does not belong to Europe because of Crusader history nor does it belong to modern Zionism due to religious history. Our art, its form, its content, and its historic sources should have been the single focus of this book. Moreover, the repetition in numerous places in the book of an idyll of past harmonies between ethnic groups in Palestine is a shameful apology to false accusations. I feel neither guilt nor shame in relation to Israelis or Jews. I do feel immense pride in our struggle for national liberation. Thus I see both the apology and the accusation as remnants of European Colonialist thinking which does not belong to me.

Ahat Moberg calls Israeli Independence I call Israeli occupation and what he might understand as The Peace Process I understand most clearly is a

process of economic and military strangulation. Thus, in view of the political content of the book, of which I was not informed in advance, this statement is made necessary especially since my position was made clear from the very beginning. I do owe a debt to Moberg for making clear through his book precisely the European attitudes towards Palestinian Arabs which I must address -- and this helped form the structure of my response. Without his venturesome nature and his sincerity we would not have had this arena for dialogue and exchange.

To read Part I of this review again [click here](#).

Please make comments by [clicking here](#).

Copyright, Samia A. Halaby, 1998, All rights reserved. To request permission to reproduce any part of these words or pictures [CLICK HERE](#).

To return to Writings menu click [WRITINGS](#)
For a view of the entire studio select [MENU](#).

