

The Jerusalem of Palestinian Artists

Marie MMina - 08/05/2009

All born in Jerusalem, they are part of the first generation of artists. Some portray the city they have always lived in. Others, in exile, lay on a canvas their childhood memories or their claims.

Ranging from figurative to abstract style, from the 60's to the 80's, "Jerusalem, Lexicon of Colours" collects works with various styles and from different periods, where the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem in 1967 marks a fracture.



The exhibition begins with the watercolours of **Sophie Halaby** (1912-1998), one of the first Palestinian painters to receive formal training in the arts. Her Jerusalem full of domes and cacti basks in soft colours. In her landscapes the city appears from afar, always surrounded by vegetation. When this artist - who has always lived in Jerusalem – paints “The golden door from the Gethsemane gardens” the delicate green of the olive trees dominates the ochre of the Old City walls.

Jumana Hussein (1932-) in turn, traces a geometrical Jerusalem. The bell towers and minarets, the cross and crescent moons draw a city of unreal whiteness dappled with gold.



These are in striking contrast with the lively colours of **Taysir Sharaf** (1939-2001). The latter was barely ten when his family emigrated to Egypt following to the creation of Israel (1948). The painter came back to his childhood city

only after completing his studies. He had a ringside seat when the Jewish state occupied East Jerusalem. The city then became his obsession. In his paintings he tightly encircles the Old City with lively and colourful Arabic writings.

A similar palette can be found in **Vladimir Tamari** (1942-) but the intention is more tortured, mystical inspirations mix with political claims. The artist, now living in Japan, evokes in “Moskobiyya prison” the three days he spent in 1976 in this famous East Jerusalem detention centre when he came to visit his family. It was the first time since long that he had come back to see his city but this happened from a prison cell window.





Though abstract in style, the oil and acrylic paintings of **Samia A. Halaby** (1936-) nonetheless represent a strong declaration of rebellion. In her triptych “Occupied Jerusalem”, dark brush strokes cover the light flat tints. “It’s as if I was a witness of the last living instants of the beautiful and ancient city of Jerusalem”, writes this exile who currently teaches at Yale. “My Jerusalem is being murdered. And I paint this picture while feeling the pain and beauty of Jerusalem.”

Kamal Boullata (1942-) also works in abstract, though with geometrical shapes. As a child he was impressed by the inscriptions that decorate the Dome of the Rock, and as an adult he reinvents Arabic writing. His hypnotic motifs get tangled in vibrant hues, to bestow a textured appearance.

Finally, the display closes up on an installation by **Vera Tamari** (1945-). The sister of Vladimir Tamari is one of the organisers of the exhibition. For the “Curtain of Hilaneh” she used a crochet work made by her grand-mother. She photographed each motif – angels, flower pots, birds. Green, red, white or violet colours light up the transparent papers from behind. This checkerboard reminds of the dance floor in “Saturday Night Fever”. The artist explains that she intended to reflect both the “austerity and magic of Jerusalem”. In her work, the present rejoins with the past.



It is similar to what is happening to Jerusalem. Declared capital of Arab culture for 2009, the city, on this occasion, regains this part of culture that Israel is trying to erase: its Palestinian identity. The exhibition “Lexicon of Colours” at the Al-Hoash Gallery in East Jerusalem, further to displaying the richness of this culture, reveals its persistence within those same places where it is sought to be eradicated.



«Jerusalem, Lexicon of Colours»

Galerie Al-Hoash (Palestinian Art Court)

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Translated from French by Nada Ghorayeb