

# LE MONDE *diplomatique*

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## How green is my valley?

ART PALESTINE INTERNATIONAL'S 2014 EXHIBIT

BY RAOUF J. HALABY, 15 APRIL 2014

**I**n part, Mary Evangelista's bio reads as follows:

"... [She] has many years' experience as a critic and curator. Her past exhibitions have included Art New Zealand, a touring exhibition of contemporary Maori and New Zealand artists, two exhibitions of contemporary Israeli Art, and *Designing a Nation's Capitol* exhibition at New Orleans Museum of Art. As a critic, she has worked for publications including ART News, Saturday Review and Newsday."

"In 2005, New York-based critic and curator Mary Evangelista was assigned to write a story on Israeli contemporary art for a major publication. In the course of a research trip to the Middle East, she was introduced to a number of outstanding emerging Palestinian artists. Evangelista's editor refused to include these artists in the magazine, but the experience ignited an ongoing interest in Palestinian contemporary art ... painting, sculpture, mixed media, photography, and video works."

Established by Evangelista and several dedicated supporters, *Art Palestine International* is "a New York-based cultural organization dedicated to contemporary Palestinian art, [and the] organization collaborates with museums, galleries and non-profits to produce art exhibitions, events, and publications." Two examples of Evangelista's curatorial efforts in exhibiting Palestinian art include a January 2008 exhibit in Washington, DC, and a July 2009 New York exhibit co-curated by Michael Connor.

Over the past three years, Evangelista has continued her initiative to research Palestinian art. She has undertaken studio visits with artists living under occupation, artists living in Israel, and expatriates living in London and Paris. As evidenced by her rich art collection, she continues to pursue her curatorial interests by venturing into and highlighting Palestinian contemporary art in every medium. Had it not been for generous donors, including the New York-based *Alwan For the Arts (Colors for the Arts) Foundation*, Israeli artist Yigal Ozeri, the Qattan Foundation, and numerous other committed Arab and Jewish donors, volunteers and supporters, this exhibit would not have become a reality. Thanks to Mary Evangelista's curatorial discernment for including Ozeri in a 1988 Israeli Art exhibit in New York, he is currently a successful New York-based artist.

For well over a year now the indefatigable Mary Evangelista has struggled to curate a show by and about Palestinians in, of all places, New York City. Even though far too many doors were slammed in her face, her perseverance and commitment to giving a visual voice for the dispossessed people of Palestine has come to fruition: an art exhibit by Palestinian artists about the Palestinian experience gives dignity to the 7 million Palestinians, a people forgotten by history, and a people who've been paying a heavy price for the transgressions of Europe's Holocaust.

Under the title **How Green Was My Valley**, the show opens on April 3, 2014, at the White Box Art Center, 329 Broome St., New York's SOHO district, and will run through April 27, 2014.

Without exception, whether under the brutal Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, or in diaspora, every Palestinian has a first-hand experience with dislocation, uncertainty, a perpetual search for identity, and a strong yearning for dignity through justice and statehood. And without exception, every Palestinian has deep affinities with vegetation; the olive tree, zaatar (thyme), saber (cactus plant and/or fruit), vegetables of every type and color, and the citrus fruit (lemons, oranges, grapefruits and tangerines), to name but a few, are to Palestinian ethnic and cultural identities as apple pie is to Americans.

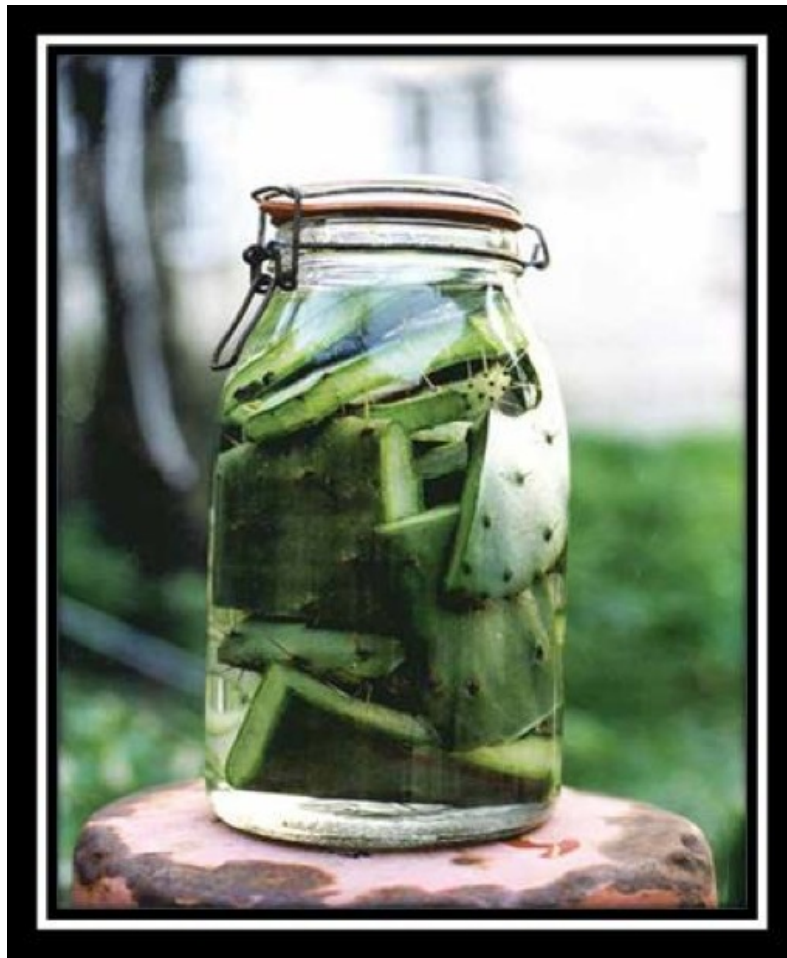
The show poses the following question: How Green is the Palestinian valley? What do Palestinians see in that Kafkaesque valley in which they negotiate and navigate the landmines of prejudice, hatred, vilification, dispossession, and pugnacious violence on a daily basis?



Because it compresses the Palestinian experience in a powerful and dynamically expressive visual statement, Muhammad Musallam's 2012 installation under the title **Cultural Siege** is as expressive a composition as I've seen. The installation depicts a cluster of vibrant green lemon foliage in the center of which is a contrastingly and strategically-placed aurelian-yellow lemon. While the lemon is adjoined to the tendrils in an ordinary manner, the artist thrust a cold and callous metal bolt that violates the lemon's natural form, thus despoiling it and forever desecrating its character. Thrust through the leathery rind, the bolt's head, counterbalanced by a washer and nut, constrict and contort what would have otherwise been a normal sphere into an elliptical aberration. The exposed threading on the bolt signifies a perpetual tightening. The lemon thus becomes a metaphor for Palestine and her people: Palestinians are squeezed by a giant and ruthless vise-like and brutal mechanical force, an occupation whose powerful constrictions are slowly wiping off an entire nation off the map. Simple in content, Musallam's installation speaks volumes about the peristaltic disintegration of Palestine in a losing battle to illegal occupation, ethnic cleansing, the demolition of homes, and the illegal theft of land by religious fanatics abetted by an occupation government (and American taxpayers) doing its best to destroy Palestinians by obliterating their institutions, identity, and dignity.



In Taysir Batniji's 2004 *Transit*, there are two very plain and sterile-looking rooms, much like the infamous interrogation spaces one encounters at border crossings between Israel, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and at some border crossings in the Arab world. While the background is an antiseptic white void of any life, the foreground is a large waiting room in which a centrally-positioned door is flanked by two cheap, black, vinyl sofas. The tiled floor, which commences in the foreground, punctures the space to create a receding plane that merges background and foreground into one large waiting room. Space and sofas are merely props in a composition which depicts three seated, dejected-looking men — two to the right, and one to left. Palestinians are all too familiar with waiting: waiting (for hours at a time) at check points to go to work, schools, universities, and hospitals, waiting for documents, waiting for permission to deliver babies at *near, yet-so-far-away* hospitals, waiting for permission to plant and harvest their fields, waiting for permission to visit relatives in an adjoining neighborhood or village, waiting for justice, waiting for dignity, waiting for statehood and freedom, 65 years of waiting, and, like Godot, waiting, waiting on the mirage, that elusive dream, that Sisyphean trek into an existential *now-you-see-it-now-you-don't* Sartrean no-man's land of incertitude.



The double entendre in Rana Bishara's 1999 *Saber* [sic] is quite obvious. The term *saber* can either refer to the delicious cactus fruit (harvested and consumed by Palestinians in a sort of collective national rite of passage), or, depending on the lexical/syntactical context, *saber* (سبأر) means patience. An old-style canning jar is packed with cut up cacti leaves entrapped in a concoction of brine. The interspersed prickly thorns, the plastic seal, the old-style metal lid,

and the jar are a metaphor for Palestinians living in a clapper clawed existence in occupied Palestine and the Arab World. The lush green (found on the Palestinian flag) is symbolic of the Palestinians' attachment to the land and their strong affinities to their farms, hills, plains, and the varied verdure vegetation of their beloved arable Palestinian valleys. Tightly packed in this outmoded jar, Rana Bishara's cacti leaves draw attention to the claustrophobic social, political, and stifling compression in which Palestinians have been squeezed since 1948. Most of those who fled to neighboring Arab countries in 1948 and 1967 are living in refugee camps where they are abused and starved to death (as is unfolding in the Damascus-based Yarmouk camp). Those living in the West Bank are restricted to cantons bisected by settlements and Jews-only highways, and the 1.7 million Gaza residents, living in dire conditions in the world's largest open air prison, have been put "on a diet" (Ariel Sharon's words) in a hermetically sealed cage.

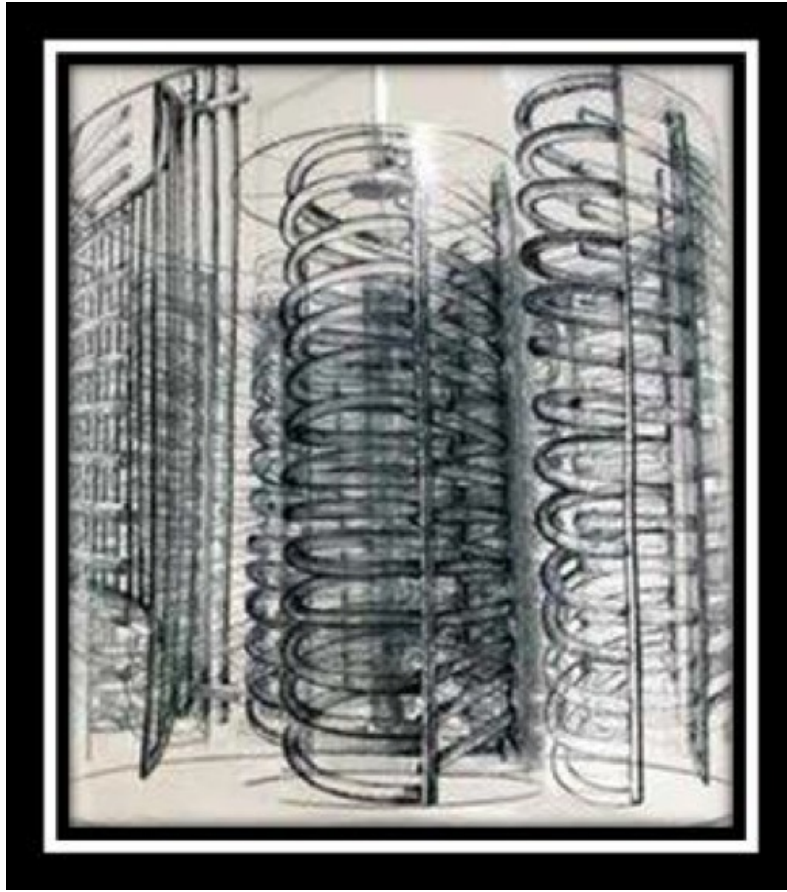


Because it captures what the acclaimed French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson called *the decisive moment*, Tanya Habijouqa's 2013 **Occupied Pleasures** is perhaps one of the best examples of irony captured in a photograph. While the background depicts a summer days' placid sea, the foreground depicts a coastal highway on which a speeding delivery van is charging ahead. The viewer is treated to buoyant cartoon images embossed on the van's side. An assortment of beach toys, including balls of varying sizes and floating tubes, are piled atop each other in the van's top rack in a cornucopia of reds, blues, yellows and greens. With no access to the beach, Palestinian children are robbed of their juvenescence and are denied even the simplest joys of childhood. Sand, gently rolling briny ripples, sea shells, starfish and sand castles, the frolicking birthright of every child, are snatched away in the form of a tantalizing van-full of toys speeding down the highway of life in a tauntingly sardonic gesture.

The Bull in Amer Shmali's 2012 3D sculpture, **Pixelated Intifada**, is an outstanding appropriation of Picasso's bull of war in the **Guernica**.



While the spiraling corkscrew-shaped coils in Samira Badran's 2009 **Have a Pleasant Stay** installation mimic modern-day high rise luxurious architectural structures, the centrifugal vortices are a poignant comment on the turnstiles, metal grids, and barricades one encounters (much like barn and slaughter house accouterments) at the hundreds of infamous check points dotting the West Bank and Gaza Strip.



Muhammad Abuasal's 2011 digital print, **A Metro in Gaza**, is yet another example of irony. The background depicts the beautiful, off-limits to Palestinians azure-Blue Mediterranean Sea.



A slice of the Gaza shoreline and skimpy shacks are bisected by a swath of sand. In the foreground are two men gesticulating in what appears to be an animated dialogue. Above the men is a Paris-style red Metro sign beneath which is an Arabic sign that reads: Gaza Metro. Because of the 66 year occupation by the Egyptians and Israelis, Gaza's roads and transportation system are, at best, primitive to non-existent. Not only is Abuasal's Metro sign an acrid comment on the status of the decrepit and archaic transportation conditions in this God-forsaken strip of

land due to Israel's protracted vicious, callous, and merciless siege, but its deep irony is also a stroke of brilliance. Could the metro be a metaphor for the tunnels through which vital goods are smuggled from Egypt into Gaza? And one has to wonder about Egypt's thuggish dictators and their complicity with the US and its Israeli masters to destroy the tunnels and force Gazans into submission.

In addition to dislocation, alienation, injustice, identity, oppression, and hopelessness, in one way or another each of the 15 artists whose works are exhibited in this outstanding show deals with the forces that rob human beings of their basic human rights, of stolen identities and dignity, and the denial of freedom in a perpetual collective tragedy imposed, ironically, by the victims of Europe's dastardly 20th century genocide.

Are the artists' Valleys Green? Each artist has eloquently addressed the question in a richly diverse and creative manner, and each artist has drawn on her/his talent to use the visual arts as an illustrative vehicle to make a statement and to appeal to an apathetic world.

Kudos to Mary Evangelista the artists, and the efforts of all the volunteers and donors; this is a show worth viewing.

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