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Refraction: Moving Images on Palestine



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Bold and provocative, the art in this P21 Gallery exhibition presents a Palestine that is inextricably bound to its painful history and difficult politics

“Direct, yet open to interpretation, with an air of mysticism.” This is how Inzajeano Latif, an artist involved in the ‘Refraction: Moving Images on Palestine’ exhibition described the artwork on display.

The title itself already suggests an individual and distinct approach to current thought on Palestine. We are not dealing with a mere “reflection”, where events are relayed as they occurred, rather we are taken into a manipulated and insightful portrayal of the socio-historical context of the Holy Land, with intimate thoughts and daring use of media – including a sculpture by Khalid Jarrar using concrete from the eight metre high West Bank wall – which form a beautifully fragmented interpretation and journey through the artists’ minds.

“The majority of people growing up and living in the United Kingdom and the west do not know much of what the Middle East has to offer apart from politics and religion,” claims Yahya Zaloom, the gallery director who, along with Inzajeano Latif, explains what initiated the idea for this exhibition curated by Shaheen Merali.

The P21 Gallery is a non-profit organisation that aims to bridge the gap between east and west, and to remove the stereotypical, orientalist view of Arabs and provide another medium that will inform and enlighten the general public on Arab culture. Zaloom, an MA Visual Culture graduate, recalls a comment on how the most influential Arab intellect of the past 50 years has been Edward Said, who appears to be the “go-to” Arab for most western scholars.

It is clear that the everyday British citizen does not have western or Middle Eastern foreign relations on his or her mind, rather, the majority are interested in fashion, football and films. As such, the P21 gallery is trying to find a common language; Art.

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Latif expresses his disillusionment with current art galleries which mainly focus on western art, arguing that when the Arab world is depicted, it is “rebranded” with a tendency to focus on the problems. P21 wants to re-open the cultural doors that were temporarily locked shut by the politics of the region.

“What about the everyday lives of the people?” Yahya asks. *The Roof*, a film included in the exhibition by Kamal Aljafari, provides a nostalgic look at Ramallah and Jaffa casting a glance at his own friends and family, and adding a warm, personal connection to the viewing experience.

Although undoubtedly providing a fresh perspective, the work tends to deal with the same themes present in many Arab artists’ work. One notable example is a piece which, at first glance, appears to be a simple still-life of a tea tray by Mohammad Al-Hawajiri depicting a looming black ship in the background. The piece, perhaps, is forewarning danger while alluding to the constant conflict, which may not always be at the forefront but is continually present in the Middle East.

I ask whether it is possible to divorce politics from Arab art, to look at what Palestine had to offer “pre-nakba”. Zaloom explains that the curators he works with are independent, and he would never want to influence them or force them to change their artistic direction. Although he has asked artists why they don’t explore themes of love or the environment, they ask, “What about my identity?” The politics of the region is so intrinsic to the people’s nature that, without it, they are lost or feel like their work is not an accurate reflection of themselves.

From **Tarzan and Arab’s** vibrant cinematic interpretations of previous Israeli Operations in Gaza, to Peter Kennard and Cat Picton Phillipps’ **18-metre long photo-collage**, ‘Palestine’, that depicts the Palestinian journey from 1900 to the present with images of exile, chaotic barbed wire and seemingly endless refugee setups, the art in this exhibition focuses on both past and present. But it evades the final tense: the future.

I ask whether art has the ability to work towards future solutions in the conflict and lives of Palestinians. Latif disagrees that the art of this exhibition does not explore the future: “The majority of art on display is new and fresh. It is looking at resilience. The artist is on a journey moving towards the future.”

Although a piece of work cannot come to concrete solutions for the future, the very fact that contemporary Arab art is emerging shows a sign of promise – a new cultural intifada perhaps. There is a heavy atmosphere as you walk around this exhibition. A tragic sense of loss and pain as you approach the interactive “tours” of refugee camps. A sense of confusion and questions of sectarian conflict arise when confronted with Laila Shawa’s hovering ‘Stealth Cross-Metamorphoses’ of rockets attached to a giant cross. But the whole exhibition works as a unified piece of art, symbolising the complexity of an individual Palestinian sense of identity, the collective resistance within tiny villages like Bil’in in the West Bank, as well as the global effort.

“The whole exhibition works as one piece, solid, beautifully intense. Different styles of work merge to make one journey. There is sculpting, painting and sounds – the whole thing is a piece of art” Latif concludes.

The exhibition at the P21 Gallery has now concluded. For more information, please

visit: <http://www.p21.org.uk/aboutMovingImagesonPalestine.aspx>.

Image from: <http://www.kennardphillipps.com/palestine-1>

About the author



Nadine Almanasfi

Nadine Almanasfi is currently studying for a BA in Liberal Arts at King’s College London.

1 Comment



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"A tragic sense of loss and pain as you approach the interactive "tours" of refugee camps"

The tragedy could have ended today, if the leader of the PA decided to dismantle the squalid refugee camps in the West Bank and allowed the refugees to live in decent conditions. But the Palestinian leadership opts for using the refugees as poster boys for Israeli "oppression" and as breeding ground for terrorists.

There is indeed a tragedy, a tragedy brought about by the Palestinian leadership upon their people, Israel is not responsible for that.

"...the most influential Arab intellect of the past 50 years has been Edward Said, who appears to be the "go-to" Arab for most western scholars."

Well, for anyone wishing to see what Said was really about, and that he not only did he misrepresent the nature of the conflict, but also acted as an instigator to terrorism, she may have a look at the link:

<http://www.theaugeanstables.com/conspiracy-theory-article/>

"I ask whether art has the ability to work towards future solutions in the conflict and lives of Palestinians."

The conflict won't be resolved unless the West stops rewarding the alpha-male Palestinian culture. The Palestinians have refused generous peace offers because of this honor-shame mindset that smacks of machismo, they want to shed Israeli blood so as to assuage their hurt honor at having been defeated by the Jews which they used to view as weaklings and inferiors, and an alpha-male mindset cannot swallow such a (perceived) insult. Add to this the damage done to the religious pride of Muslim Palestinians (no land that used to be Islamic is supposed to belong to infidels) and you have the two motivators for the Palestinian intransigence. And the West keeps rewarding this mindset by forcing the Israelis to more and more concessions. That's why the conflict cannot be resolved, the West points the finger to the wrong person.

Art is great, but it cannot resolve this conflict.

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