

:: www.uruknet.info :: informazione dal medio oriente :: information from middle east :: [vs-1]

Earlier this month, Palestinian artist Ahmad Canaan invited the Palestine Monitor into his private studio at his home in Tamra in the northern Galilee for an interview. At age 47, Canaan has been one of the foremost Palestinian artists living within Israel for the last twenty years.

A graduate of the Bezalel Academy of Art in Design in Jerusalem, Canaan's works are on display throughout Israel, the occupied Palestinian territories, the Middle East, Europe and North America.

A father of four, painter, sculptor, gallery owner, and second-class citizen in his own country, Canaan discussed his role as a Palestinian artist living in what is now called Israel.

Ahmad Canaan/ Palestinian Artist



Video by [Rafael Guendelman Hales](#)

Dylan Collins: What types of art do you specialize in and on what subjects do you focus?

Ahmad Canaan: "My work mainly consists of sculptures and paintings. I work with a variety of mediums in sculptures, ranging everywhere from aluminum and steel to stone and wood. For my paintings, I generally use oil colors and mix mediums.

"During my last 25 years as an artist, I have dealt with many different subjects, some of which have stayed with me and have been transformed along with my career. They have taken on new shapes and evolved. Some themes have been in my work since the beginning and will most likely continue to do so until I die – such as the case of Palestinian refugees and the Right of Return, the case of Jerusalem, our (Palestinian) connection to the land, as well as the ancient history of the Canaanite culture and its connection to this land."

"Some of my works are influenced from the political situation – especially 'our situation' here as Palestinians living inside Israel and the complicated problem of identity. I live this problem and I endeavor to express myself via my art."

D.C: I've noticed you work a lot with symbols, which ones do you most often use and what is their significance?

A.C: "I use a few symbols repeatedly in my art. One is the key that all refugees have to which they attach their hopes and dreams of returning to their homes. I have incorporated it into many paintings and sculptures. Refugees in general are a large focus of my works—they surface again and again, both in sculpture and in painting, each time in different variations.

The other symbol I use most frequently is the figure of a knight on horseback—the figure represents Salah Al-Din—who, for me, characterizes both a savior and a leader. We as Palestinians have a problem with leadership – and throughout the Middle East as a whole. The knight is used to embody, and provide a visual sense, to our longing for a great and wise leader.

D.C: The image of Salah Al-Din is an icon of you work. Where did you get the idea to incorporate that image into so many of your works? How was that idea born?

A.C: "The idea started out with a sketch. I made a pattern of Salah Al-Din on his horse and cut stencils out of iron. I originally used it for the larger statue here in Tamra, but I then began to incorporate the pattern into many of my paintings as well. To copy it, to spray it, to stick it. Suddenly, it opened a whole new door for me. I began to use the extra material, left over from the original cut outs as a screen, or meshrabiya as it is called in Arabic. I began putting the screen over some of my paintings or even painting on the screen itself. It's not only a decorative motive – the screen is of Salah Al-Din and his horse. It has meaning. It connotes the plight of Palestinian refugees. They are waiting for their 'savior.' I put the image of Salah Al-Din, over the paintings of Palestinian refugees, in order to tie together their long wait for return with the 'savior'

image of Salah Al-Din. They are a part of the big problem and they are still waiting for someone to save them. Nothing has happened since 1947. They are still in the refugee camps, nobody has returned."

D.C: How is your art accepted into the larger Israeli cultural community?

A.C: "My political art works are accepted in Israeli galleries and museums. They know that I'm an Arab and a Palestinian. They know my case, what I stand for and the majority of them accept what I am attempting to illustrate. Sometimes they buy it too. Some of my artwork about Palestinian refugees is in Israeli collections... My work touches on social, political, and historical aspects. It's our reality. It's our life. If they choose not to accept it then that is their problem.

"One of the most difficult aspects of our [Palestinian citizens of Israel] situation is that we have to constantly prove that we exist... We have to prove it to the Israelis, to the Palestinians, as well as the rest of the people throughout the Arab world too... all because of our double identity. We are, at the same time, Palestinians and Israeli citizens. Sometimes this can work out in our favor and we can win things from both sides but most of the time it is problematic because the others don't know how to deal with us. They do not accept us as we are. They want to accept us as they want us to be – both the Israelis and the Palestinians. They do not understand the reality of our situation."

D.C: How do you incorporate these feelings into your artwork?

A.C: "I speak to both sides in my art – and sometimes, I feel like I'm the bridge, to work towards an understanding between the two. Both sides have the right to exist and to live. I'm looking for a common future, not a separate one. This land is too small to divide. I see, in the future, one big state, for all the people who can be equal together as lovers, as friends, as partners.

"The ancient Canaanite culture belongs to both sides. It's the original mythology that has been present on this land from the beginning. Many towns and villages have their original Canaanite names until today." One of my paintings details a view of the old city of Jerusalem. On the right side of the city I've superimposed the Canaanite king of Jerusalem and on the left side is Abraham. When Abraham entered Jerusalem 4,000 years ago, the Canaanite king welcomed him with a drink of wine. The painting represents a kind of peace between two groups. This is what I think about and what I wish for this country."

D.C: So you prefer a one state solution?

A.C: "Yes, but even more than that – I prefer an open Middle East, without borders – similar to the United States and Europe. I believe it will happen one day."

D.C: As a Palestinian with Israeli citizenship, do you feel disconnected from the rest of the Arab art community?

A.C: "I used to feel very strongly disconnected, but now, because the virtual connections one can create via Facebook and other similar social media sites, I have the opportunity to contact and create connections with artists and galleries in other Arab countries and across the world. The first exhibition I participated in within the Middle East was in Egypt with the Ostraka International Sculpture Symposium in Sharm Al-Sheikh – I was there twice and I'm invited to the next one. At Ostraka I met a lot of other Arab artists from across the Middle East. Even though I have an Israeli passport, I consider myself and introduce myself as a Palestinian artist."

D.C: What is your relationship with the Israeli Authorities and how, if at all, have they influenced your work?

A.C: "Eight years ago, almost all of my work came from projects funded by the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Education. I was able to design and build my house with that money. I was able to involve elementary and high school students in public works within their own communities. But since Netanyahu came into office, the funding has been significantly reduced. He changed the policy for supporting culture... the budgets for the Ministry of Culture and Education were significantly cut."

"Since Netanyahu became Prime Minister I have been unemployed when it comes to projects financed by the Ministries of Culture, off of my work. The ministries used to support a lot of projects through which I could work with students and both create and teach – provide and give something back to the community. Engage them in the process."Education, etc.... They changed the policies of supporting culture and arts. That's why it's difficult these days to make a living.



Since then, I haven't been able to do such projects, so I had to look for alternatives. I created my own gallery here in Tamra. I also opened the Salon for Palestinian Arts in Jaffa, where I displayed and helped to market Palestinian art works, but that didn't go well. The cost of rent and administration was too high to make it sustainable, so we had to close it. I also had opened a gallery through the municipality here in Tamra, but that too was closed due to lack of funds. I was the curator and owner for six years but it was largely unpaid and was not viable. So now I focus solely on my own gallery and my own works. I get a lot of visitors from the Arab society, the Jewish society and also from abroad. My gallery is on the map. When tourists want to see Arab art in Israel they come here to Tamra."

D.C: Are you worried about creating works with political leanings? Do you fear the Israeli state will crack down on your freedom of expression?

A.C: "I do what I want. Sometimes I get criticized from people, the normal people in the streets, but I don't care. They have to accept me as I am. This is my situation and my works represent my situation. I want the world to know it. If someone doesn't accept it, it is his or her problem, not mine. At the same time, we are the Palestinians inside Israel and we are counted as a minority. When you have to survive all these years, treated every day of your life as a second-class citizen by the state in which you live, it's a very sensitive situation. I critique the government on this issue, but you have to be clever. I am citizen of this state and I am demanding my full rights. I pay the same taxes here that all Jewish residents get but do not get the same services – this can be openly seen in Netanyahu's decision to decrease the cultural budget in Arab villages. I want the same rights as everyone else. I don't think it's too much to ask.

To visit Ahmad Canaan's website and view a collection of his works:

<http://www.ahmadcanan.com/en/artworks/gallery.asp>

[Source](#)