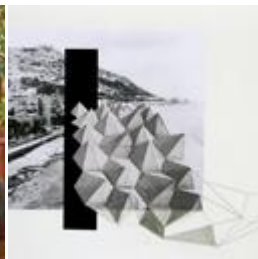


# Nakba Day: 11 artworks that reflect on Palestinian identity and occupation

From modernist paintings to science-fiction films, these works by Palestinian artists reflect on the impact of the Nakba



Sliman Mansour, 'Sad Tunes', 1977. Image courtesy of Barjeel Art Foundation, Sharjah



Alexandra Chaves  
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From the period of 1947 to 1949, more than 700,000 people were forcibly displaced and over 500 Palestinian towns and villages were destroyed.

May 15 marks Nakba Day, which commemorates this period in history. Inaugurated in 1988, it falls just after the anniversary of the declaration of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948.

**Modern Palestinian art focused on ... the beautiful arcadia that was lost**

**Adila Laidi-Hanieh, director, Palestinian Museum**

The devastation around these events and the conditions in the consequent decades are often reflected in the works of many Palestinian artists. Much of the art produced during the modern period was characterised by depictions of tragedy, loss, natural landscapes and the heroism of Palestinian subjects.

“Modern Palestinian art focused on either representing the idyllic pre-1948 period, the gorgeous sunlit fields of Palestine and the beautiful arcadia that was lost,” Adila Laidi-Hanieh, director of the Palestinian Museum, explains.

Last year, the Palestinian Museum presented *Intimate Terrains: Representations of a Disappearing Landscape*, which traced nine decades of Palestinian art across different periods and genres.

**Scroll through the gallery above to see modern and contemporary Palestinian art that address the issues of occupation, resistance and loss.**

One of the works shown was Sliman Mansour's *Yaffa*, from 1979, a portrait of a young woman with a basket of harvested Jaffa oranges. It exemplifies much of Palestinian modern art as Laidi-Hanieh describes it, from the peasant woman as a key subject to the natural environment as a backdrop.

The use of the fruit as a national and political symbol is also significant, and it emerged after Israel began marketing Jaffa oranges as an Israeli product. Its use in visual art is a way to reject this narrative and reclaim Palestinian ties to the land.

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**Adila Laidi-Hanieh**

The artist Ismail Shammout also employs this visual element in his *Madonna of the Oranges*, which is part of the Barjeel Art Foundation's collection. The female figure echoes Madonna paintings from the Renaissance as she stands against a lush verdant setting. Shammout and his wife, Tamam El Akhal, have not only explored the Nakba extensively, but also depict the struggle for an independent and peaceful Palestinian state.

Another work by Mansour, titled *Jamal Al Mahamel (Camel of Hardship)*, from 1973, depicts an elderly porter carrying the load of Jerusalem on his back.

The image has become ubiquitous in Palestinian homes, schools and offices. The painting was once owned by Muammar Qaddafi, who kept it in his compound in Tripoli until it was ruined by American air raids in 1986.

Over the years, contemporary Palestinian artists, including those who have lived most of their lives outside of the state, have addressed displacement, the conditions of those who live in the diaspora and the occupation.

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Laidi-Hanieh notes a shift in the way themes are approached and subjects are chosen. "For the contemporary period, we had an abandonment of romanticism, whether it is the joyful or the tragic. Now we have a focus on what I call 'the grim positivity of the occupation'. There is no depiction of the heroic freedom fighter, the strong peasant woman, the beautiful Palestine... This means that

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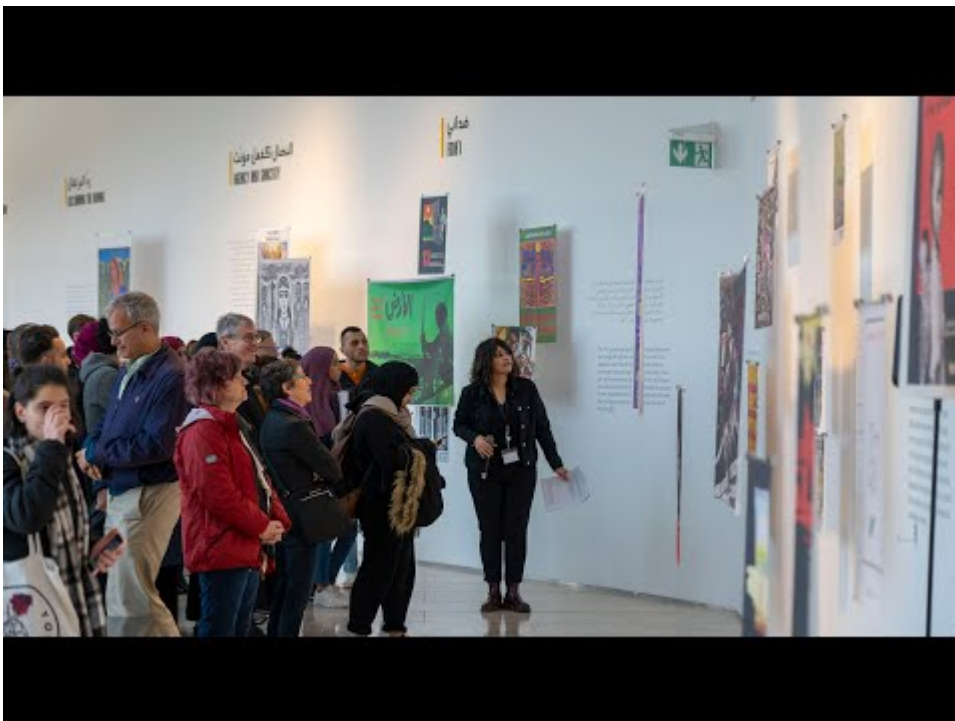
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now, when Palestinian artists represent political subjects, it is not a direct manner like modern artists. It is an indirect manner filtered through their personal and subjective experience”.

Hazem Harb, who lives in Dubai, is known for tackling the Israeli occupation in work that ranges in media, from installation to collage and painting. His series, *Archaeology of Occupation*, juxtaposes photographs of Palestinian landscapes before the Nakba, with heavy, concrete shapes that recall Bauhaus architecture, but also the West Bank barrier erected by Israel.

In Larissa Sansour’s work, the artist uses science-fiction to examine Palestinian identity. In her film, *Nation Estate*, the entirety of the Palestinian population and territories, from Ramallah to Gaza, is contained in a single skyscraper, yet remains within the boundaries of the Israeli wall.

Her most recent film, *In Vitro*, reflects on the intergenerational divide between those who have lived through the Nakba and those who learn of it through the memories of their elders. The film was first shown at the Venice Biennale’s Danish Pavilion last year, and was later featured at the Palestinian Museum’s Intimate Terrains retrospective.





Laidi-Hanieh notes a third important aspect of Palestinian art: the design of political posters. This was the focus of the Palestinian Museum's most recent exhibition, *Glimmer of a Grove Beyond*.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, Palestinian political artists, alongside other Arab and western artists and designers, produced thousands of posters for the Palestine Liberation Organisation and its diverse political factions.

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**Adila Laidi-Hanieh**

“This is a very important art form... The posters were direct forms of communication that have political messaging and direct documentation of the Nakba,” she says.

One example is a poster published by the Australian Union of Students around 1970. It features a photograph of a displaced family in the aftermath of the Nakba. Much like other political posters, this one documented the brutal reality of the conflict.

For Laidi-Hanieh, the notion of categorising art responding to the Nakba is difficult to pin down, particularly since the “catastrophe” continues to this day. “The Nakba is ongoing because occupation is ongoing, displacement is ongoing, ethnic cleansing is ongoing... All Palestinian art, in a way, represents the Nakba, not only its 1948 inaugural chapter,” she says. “It’s not as though the Nakba happened and now we have moved to a different situation materially, politically, intellectually or emotionally”.

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