יפעת מידע תקשורת

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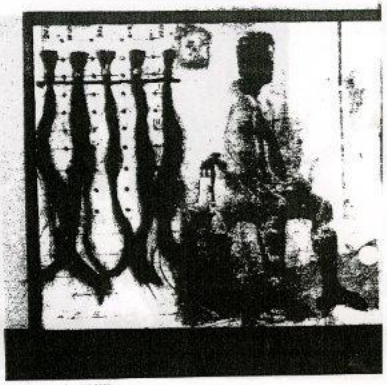
Art

Artists lifting the veil

The country's first contemporary Arab art exhibition in a museum raises quiet questions about Arab identity while shaking up the local art world

• By LAUREN GELFOND-FEUERIGER



Asad Azi, 'Myself and I,' 2005

After three first-time boys were stillborn, the Ad family gathered in the Druze village of Jeffat, the father-in-law of Mosar, to ward off the evil eye. The superstition that the angel of death was plucking the young boys of the family led the bereaved parents to dress their fourth son, Asad, as a girl from his birth until age six.

Today, rough paintings of a young girl with feminine accessories are actually portraits of the male artist as a young child.

Such complex issues of identity are the subject of an exhibition of 14 local Arab artists now at the L.A. Mayer Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem.

Metaphorically speaking, the show is breaking out the door at the museum, which previously primarily displayed Islamic antiquities, classical works and ethnography.

"It's about time for the museum to come out of its deep freeze and not just care about work from 1,000 years ago," says museum director Rahel Hanoch. "Arab artists live here and it's a good opportunity for the Israeli public and the public in general to know who they are and what they are expressing in their work."

The museum has always been an anomaly, dedicated to Islamic art, yet run by a Jewish staff, funded by a Jewish endowment and located in a Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem. The late philanthropist Vera Frances Bryce Salomons of England established the museum with an endowment fund in 1951, and named it in honor of a Hebrew University professor of art and architecture whom she admired. A collection of the engraving, watches, the museum has traditionally had limited funding and formal contacts with the Muslim, Arab or Israeli communities.

When guest curator Hend Abu-Shakra was invited to organize the exhibition with museum, he also made local art history, marking the first time an Arab curator put together a contemporary art show in an Israeli museum.

Abu-Shakra brought in primarily Muslim artists, but organized the framework to include Christian, Druze and Bedouin artists. The theme, "Correspondences," addresses the Arabs' apparent with local traditions, religious and personal experiences on one side, and Jewish neighbors, Israeli law and the canon of Western art and society on the other, creating an identity of insider and outsider, both as artists and citizens.

"Arab artists have thoughts that are not only about politics," says Abu-Shakra. "We are also interested in social and personal areas, like all artists. But there are not many shows open to Arab artists."

Indeed, until Abu-Shakra pulled this exhibition together, no Israeli museum has had an exhibition exclusively dedicated to contemporary local Arab art. Museums do hold Arab works in their collections and have had select solo exhibitions.

While there are no clear responses to why these have been no group shows, there are a number of factors that likely play a role. Museum curators choose labels for works to determine where they should be housed and displayed, and tend not to consider local Arab works separately from other contemporary local works. Palestinian artists living abroad might have their works grouped with the international art collections. There are also fewer opportunities to study and display art in the Arab communities and so less involvement in the art world.

But there is obviously also a political element, since many Arab artists want to be recognized as being Israeli citizens, and yet having their unique heritage and point of view that sets their work and identity apart.

"I studied in Tel Aviv. I work in Hebrew. It's incredibly fun to straddle two cultures. But I am a citizen of Israel and an Arab artist in Israel. I am not Israeli. I can't be Israeli. That means being Jewish and a Zionist," Abu-Shakra says.

Many Arab artists who face similar identity conflicts may be hesitant to have their work labeled as "Israeli art," curators have concluded. But says Abu-Shakra, "Museums need to open up."

AT THE EXHIBITION, a unique Arab visual language is apparent in a number of the works.

The first works seen at the entrance are Mosar Ad's arched clay flat breads, reference to the traditional Arab breads, like pita and laffa, in colors reminiscent of the patched sheets worn at sunset. Patterns within recall antiquities that have captured images in mud.

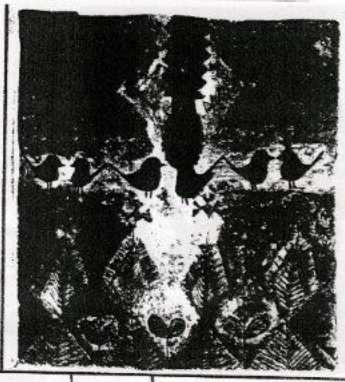
Huda Lamadi's colorful mixed-media paintings borrow images and textures from traditional Palestinian embroidery and put them into a contemporary context, breaking from the rigidity of embroidery patterns and traditional female roles.

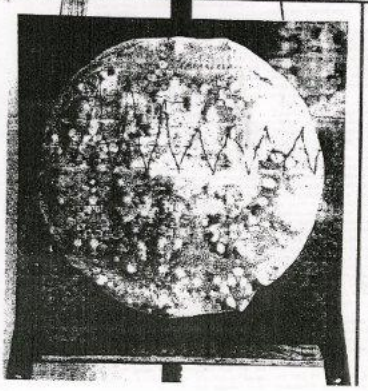
Buthaina Abu-Wilbawi's series "The needle vanquishes the sword" also mixes traditional embroidery patterns with modern and expressive techniques, but on actual Bedouin-style clothing that she creates. Pins with pearls at the end are seemingly jabbed in aggressively, while loose threads hang unfinished.

Several of the works also rely on Arabic calligraphy, which provides cultural context, yet necessity for the non-Arabic-speaking viewer, who is not privy to translation.

Khader Odeibi's "The Family" series, for example, shows portraits on leopard- calligraphied white animal hide. The writing is selections from Palestinian poetry.

In the installation and video "Love Letters," a man with fingernails covered now is picking petals off psychedelic daisies, in contrast to images of some ghostly skin disease, alluding to the high pleasure principle in contrast to the nearly flesh-eating pain of first love (and may not be both). though it certainly gives that impression. The installation part also includes reams and reams of papers with Arabic writing, dramatically leaving the non-Arabic speaker to know what the love letters say, that they can be written with so much seeming passion and to fill up so many thousands of pages.





The works that deal with more political themes are gentle and subtle.

Eight photos by Adam Kwiet show captain, bullet structures and abandoned or ruined areas that are now inhabited by Jews. The works feel sensitive, sad and longing, rather than angry.

One sculpture portrays empty clothing on wooden Abu-Shakra – the outside-wielded brother – shows local landscapes that are more restrained, and yet again, a restrained theme. For example, an almond tree is dry and bare, like an ethnic man walking against the wind.

In the political battle of Israeli Art being forced as a gate to stand on the angel of death and its heavenly identity, but not in a negative way. It only added another dimension of gentleness, he notes.

THE ABU-SHAKRA family is prominent on the local art scene. Hend, the curator, has been curator of collage and is known as an artist and teacher in the Arab community. Her husband, Abu-Shakra, co-founded him the Lewis Shaski sewing artist and and the teacher-artist couple. His middle brother, Nasi, founded and runs the Umm al-Fahm art gallery in Wadi Ara, which showcases local Arab and Israeli works. He is also working to establish the first contemporary Arab art museum in the country, as I was creating a project supported in principle by the municipality and the Ministry of Culture. [illegible]