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<https://muftah.org>. "Karma" from the Predators series by Jeffar Khaldi

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# The Voices of Palestinian Artists: From Palestine With Hope

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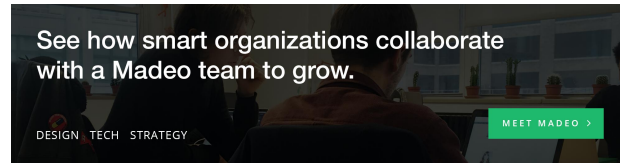
May 30th, 2013

As a fanatical art lover, I have been eternally fascinated by Arab art both in relation to the artists and the market. It was a dream come true, then, when I had the opportunity while working at Artspace London to help produce an exhibition with two Palestinian artists whose careers I have long admired: Jeffar Khaldi and Tarek Al Ghoussein.

For years, the art world has seen a steady growth in admiration for Palestinian art.

Palestinian artists, such as Kamal Boullata and Laila Shawa, have impressed both Western and native audiences, while also nurturing younger artists working both within and outside of Palestine.

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Recently in the UK, the exposure given to contemporary Palestinian art has grown exponentially, ranging from charity-based exhibitions and residencies to large retrospectives. In addition to Artspace London, some of the major institutions and galleries exhibiting this art include: the Mosaic Rooms at the Qattan Foundation, Arts Canteen, P21 Gallery, Delfina Foundation, The Arab British Centre, Leighton House Museum, Rose Issa Projects, Selma Feriani Gallery, Nour Festival, and Shubbak Festival.

I had the opportunity to get to know Jeffar and Tarek while they visited London for their joint exhi-

bition, *From Palestine With Hope*, which runs until July 6<sup>th</sup> at Art-space's Chelsea location.

From their sarcastic responses to some of my questions to the breakthrough moments when I would have the chance to get down to the real issues and stories behind their work and lives, it was amusing to be around these two friends and whimsical artists.

As we discussed the exhibition, Jeffar, who was hiding behind his sunglasses, asked me “why should I explain my art when people can just walk around and feel what they feel, think what they want to think.”

I share this sentiment with the artist. I have always admired art as a medium for bringing together a wide variety of characters and stimulating debates about why people do and do not like a certain

work of art, regardless of its origin or popularity in the press or art market.

During the exhibition's opening, art's ability to stimulate a multitude of reactions was abundantly clear.

Some viewers questioned Jeffar's *Predators* series, which depicts the artist's perceptions of a variety of Arab leaders. The series featured images of King Abdullah, Muammar Gaddafi, and Saddam Hussein, as well as American political figures including Barack Obama and Bill Clinton.

For me, *Karma* was a particularly powerful image. Showing Saddam Hussein seated amongst smiling family members, the image depicts the former dictator looking wistful and deep in thought. On the surface of this poignant print is a painterly version of Saddam's hanging, an image that was plas-

tered across the media when the event took place in 2006 and that will stick in the minds of viewers as well.

Jeffar's style of painting is one to be celebrated and admired. In an ever-changing artistic environment of new techniques and media, Jeffar has developed a purity of expression through the medium of paint.

This is something that only comes naturally to a few artists. *Me Laden and My Middle* is a perfect example of this. In the works for three years, the painting was originally based on a photograph Jeffar's cousin took of him standing in front of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. In the image, an Israeli policeman keenly watches Jeffar. Just as the photo was being taken, the artist flipped his middle finger (albeit extremely subtly by his side).

Jeffar began painting at a time when he felt a sense of understanding toward Osama Bin Laden – not agreeing with the way in which Bin Laden was going about his life, but rather understanding the reasons behind his anger. Because of this, the artist's self-portrait is a blurred mixture of himself and Bin Laden, serving as the inspiration for the painting's title.

Talking to Jeffar candidly about his life and art, one cannot help but fall for the charm of an artist who has seen it all and done it all. Everything he does is for his young son, Cy named after American artist Cy Twombly.

When I asked Jeffar who his influences were/are (a question I myself find tedious), he responded not by speedily naming artists, but rather by describing various artistic movements.

At the turn of the last century, artists were making a great impact, creating styles in art that would in turn become the most significant ‘isms’ in history. For Jeffar, these periods, including cubism, fauvism and dadaism, among others, were “romantic” – artists banded together to express what was occurring in their personal and professional lives and worked hard to leave a lasting impression on the art world.

Jeffar’s work is impacted and influenced by the media’s manipulation of world events. It is no secret that most media outlets, whether through photographs, articles, or news spots, have perpetuated a tradition of false commentary on the situation in the Middle East.

This theme is equally evident in Tarek’s work. In his earlier pieces, the influence of Western media was direct. As he himself states, “*Self-Portrait* and *B Series* started



as a result of my growing frustration with the way in which Palestinians and other Arabs were being (mis)represented in Western media. Transcending media representations has been an on-going uphill battle for all Arabs.”

In the current exhibition at Art-space, ninety percent of Tarek’s pieces have never before been seen in London, giving UK audiences an incredible glimpse into the artist’s development over six series and eight years of investigation and observation into his identity and surroundings.

The work that resonated with me the most was not an obvious choice. *Untitled 10 (B Series)* shows Tarek as a lonesome figure, standing between two huge concrete walls. As a Lebanese woman born and raised in the UK, identity has been an issue for me throughout my life. Not being “at home” in Beirut, but also consid-

ered a foreigner in the UK, *Untitled 10* left a bittersweet taste in my mouth.

In presenting the figure as isolated between two vast blocks, *Untitled 10* emphasizes the lack of escape, providing a metaphor for life in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, both of which are surrounded by Israeli-built walls.

“This series was made in response to the Wall in Palestine,” explained Tarek, “I found it absurd that it was characterized or labeled as a “Defense Barrier” rather than a device to demarcate territory. It seems to me that the construction of the wall is an act of aggression rather than a means of defense.”

Not wanting to be labeled as a Kuwaiti, Palestinian, or Arab artist, but rather wanting to just simply be an *artist*, Tarek believes that issues of national identity are not necessarily relevant to artistic

work. With a Kuwaiti passport and Palestinian heritage, identity is not static for Tarek. The questions the artist asks through his work echo those of most people from the Arab world. His audiences, of course, bring their own interpretations to his pieces.

For his next project, Tarek will be participating in the Venice Biennale, representing Kuwait. There, he will present a portion of his new body of work titled the *K Files*, which is still in progress.

The series tracks his personal encounters with sites significant to Kuwait's history. It will be shown in collaboration with the sculptor Sami Mohammad under the title of *National Works* and will 'disassemble symbols of grandeur in glorious times.' After Venice, Tarek will travel back to the Middle East where his work will be exhibited at The Third Line gallery in Dubai.

When I asked the artists how they felt about being covered by the press and being written about, Tarek responded: “I do not consider myself as a spokesperson nor an authority on the Palestinian cause, yet several press people have approached me for interviews in that way.”

Nervously and naïvely I asked them what they would like me to say about them in my article. Tarek looked to Jeffar and Jeffar looked to me, “Something cool,” he said.

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