

Prominent Palestinian artist Kamal Boullata dies in Berlin

[Melissa Gronlund](#) Aug 7, 2019



Kamal Boullata has died, aged 77. Courtesy Joanna Masel.

Palestinian artist and polymath Kamal Boullata has died in Berlin at the age of 77. As capable of summing up 1,500 years of art history as producing a painting of abstract beauty, the artist played a key role in modern Arab art.

Boullata was born in Jerusalem in 1942 and pursued art studies after he was exiled from Palestine in 1967 – first at the Academy of Rome and then at the Corcoran Museum School in Washington, DC. He was known for his colourful works in silkscreens as well as his erudition, which he laid out in studies on Palestinian art, numerous poetry collections, and assorted writings on contemporary culture.

In the 1970s and 80s, Boullata was part of the *hurufiyya* movement, when Arab artists experimented with bringing Arabic calligraphy into modernism idioms. Boullata's works, in painting and as silkscreens, are here decidedly geometric in form, resembling Western modernism as much as Palestinian embroidery with its block motifs. His later work moved away from the straight angles of this early geometry to more ethereal plays with light and colour. These silkscreens are dense with allusions — the suite *Angelus* refers to a Catholic prayer that is said three times a day — but you would never know it from looking at them: they play with their material with the softest of touches, as if coaxing out colour from the surface of water.



A detail of *Angelus* by Kamal Boullata. Courtesy Warehouse421

Boullata maintained a keen interest in history in all his writings, and was insistent on the interrelations between past and present. In the 1990s he won Fulbright grants to study Islamic art in Morocco and Andalusia, and he published two books on the history of Palestinian art, in English and in Arabic, focusing on the period from 1850 to the contemporary age.

He was clear-eyed on this work's importance: not only to prove the longevity of Palestinian culture against Israeli claims, but also because knowledge about Palestinian art had become a terra nullius. Most of the art in the country had been looted during the Nakba, and the sheer scale of dislocation that the Palestinian people suffered had few contemporary comparisons.



Kamal Boullata's 'Addolcendo 7' (2015)

[As he told *The National* in 2009:](#) "I am not a historian. I am an artist that wanted to give some order to the chaos that Palestinians have been living through. [...] Classical rules of art history writing could not begin to describe all of the fragmentations and disruptions in people's lives, but art continued to unabatedly rise out of the unremitting chaos reigning over Palestinians."

The continuity of art-making, from the Ottoman-era to the present, also proved the continuity of Palestine.

As both a writer and an artist, he played an integral role in the development of Palestinian art in the 1970s and 80s. His text *Art in the Time of the Palestinian Revolution*, published in the Lebanese journal *Mawaqif* in January 1971, sketched out what real revolutionary Palestinian art should look like: not the easily sold rehashing of Palestinian motifs, but artwork that moves forward into new forms and ideas.

Its clarion opening lines are a testament both to his beliefs and his eloquence: “There are two figures in society whose words are less important than their deeds: the politician and the artist. An Arab painter who sits holding forth about art instead of actually painting is much like the Arab politician who stands at a podium lecturing us about our future history as we lie in our beds.”

True to form, it connects the contemporary age of Palestinian art with its predecessors, referencing Job and Jonah, and makes a case for the abstract work he and others were creating at the time. He continued to make new works, mostly in silkscreens, until the end of his life.

The *National* [spoke to him on the occasion of what would be his last solo show](#), held at Abu Dhabi’s Warehouse421 and organised by his Dubai gallery, Meem, in 2018. When I reached him by phone, he was in a basement in Washington, DC, sifting through boxes he had left in a friend’s house after moving from the city years ago. His description of deciding what to keep and what to toss quickly became metaphor: he spoke about confronting time and its passing, and – he said this gently – about how much we forget of what we have lived.

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