

## Gaza's artists under fire

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Ismail Shammout, "Life Prevails" (1999). (Image courtesy of Al Jisser Group)

*"I am working under the voices of fire, Israeli warplanes ... I still breathe, take some pictures everyday"*

- Shareef Sarhan, Palestinian artist, 12 January 2009

Israel's vicious attack on Gaza has already claimed more than 1,200 lives and has injured thousands while destroying the infrastructure of the tiny coastal territory, including the handful of nonprofit venues that make cultural life

possible. Even before the invasion, the combination of 41 years of Israeli occupation, frequent military incursions and attacks, infighting among Palestinian factions, and a dwindling economy created a difficult, if not impossible, environment to sustain an art scene. Yet, with the determination that has defined Palestinian art for decades, artists in Gaza have continued to create and organize, including establishing artistic associations and collectives and organizing frequent exhibitions both at home and abroad. A look at some of Gaza's seminal artists reveals an artistic tradition that has survived years of conflict while contributing greatly to Arab culture.

Born in Lydda in 1930 and forced to live in a refugee camp in Khan Younis in 1948, Ismail Shammout was one of Palestine's leading modernist painters. He organized his first exhibition in Khan Younis in 1953 and lived in exile throughout most of his career, residing in Kuwait, Jordan, and Lebanon with his wife and colleague, Palestinian painter Tamam al-Akhal. Often incorporating local folklore and history in portraits of women and children amidst scenes of expulsion and conflict, his monumental compositions and expressionist style became an important part of Palestinian visual culture, influencing generations of artists seeking to articulate their collective narrative. In addition to creating an impressive body of work and exhibiting across the region, Shammout produced *Art in Palestine* (1989), one of the first English-language texts on Palestinian art.

Returning to Lydda after a 50 year absence, Shammout found his ancestral home occupied by Israeli settlers. The experience launched him into creating a large-scale series of paintings with the hope of having it on permanent display in Palestine. "Palestine: the Exodus and the Odyssey" (1997-2000) contains some of his most memorable work — several mural-size canvases chronicling the Palestinian existence from the Nakba, or expulsion in 1948, to the first and second Palestinian intifadas with the visual prowess and historical magnitude found in the work of those he admired such as the Mexican Muralists. In "Life Prevails" (1999), a woman stands as an anthropomorphic representation of the Palestinian spirit — defiant and stoic above dozens of children while the mosques and churches of Jerusalem and shores of Gaza are shown in the background. In an inscription accompanying the work Shammout stated that "The Israeli occupation was oppressive and ruthless. But we struggled to survive, to assert our presence, to preserve our traditions, and sustain our dreams." He died in 2006, just days before Israel's assault on Gaza and

Lebanon, which devastated the neighborhoods near his Beirut home.



Abdel Rahman al Mozayen, “Children of the Intifada” (1988). (Collection of Souha Xochitl Shayota, New York)

The pen and ink drawings of Abdel Rahmen al-Mozayen have become synonymous with Palestinian liberation struggles. Born in Kubyba in 1943, al-Mozayen’s mother was an expert in the art of embroidery and while serving as a resistance fighter with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) he produced a number of political posters in the 1970s and 1980s, iconic works that incorporate a unique combination of embroidery, ancient history, and stylized figures. Using the complex symbolism found in Palestinian embroidery to communicate steadfastness, his references to Canaanite heritage testify to the ancestral roots and longevity of Palestinian art, an element that is paramount to combating the co-option of local culture by Israelis and the near erasure of historical evidence by the occupation. Simultaneously, his employment of embroidery is significant — with occupational forces often clamping down on the displaying of flags or material related to the resistance, the art form evolved into an intricate coded language of signifiers used as an act of defiance.

In “Children of the Intifada” (1988), al-Moyzen depicts two young children dressed in traditional Palestinian garb sitting atop a horse. The horse is

adorned with an embroidered tapestry that reads “December” in Arabic and “1987” in English — the month during which the first Palestinian intifada erupted. From the horse’s bridle hangs a key, a familiar symbol for Palestinians, as many took the keys to their homes when forced out by Zionist militias in 1948, expecting their expulsion to be temporary. The children have slingshots in their hands and a supply of stones nearby, a reference to the rock-throwing youth that were essential to the protests of the uprising. In mid-journey, the horse takes the children over a bed of rocks, perhaps suggesting the Jordan River as they enter to liberate Palestine or a metaphorical road that is paved with the very tools needed for their resistance.

In contrast, the pensive and morose paintings of Faye Sersawi underscore the psychological and physical effects of the Israeli occupation. Working to document the brutal tactics used by Israeli forces, he paints images capturing the daily experiences of Palestinians under widespread violence. Concurrently, he has created such works as “Two Men” (2001), an introspective portrait of two figures, presumably a father and son. The positioning of the men, as they lean against each other, occupies the foreground and center of the composition, leaving little room for an identifiable setting. Instead, the same expressionist brushstrokes that detail the age and wear of their faces appear in the background, unifying the figures with their surroundings. Rendered with aggressive markings that suggest chaos, the violence of the background continues on the bodies of the figures as though consuming their entire beings. The intimate posturing of Sersawi’s subjects is also of interest, as it resembles that of Christian icon painting. Tracing its roots to early examples of icon painting near pilgrimage sites such as Jerusalem — an observation brought to light by painter and scholar Kamal Boullata — much of contemporary Palestinian art can be viewed within this artistic practice. Resembling compositions of the holy mother and child, the artist’s iconification of Palestinian men under siege is a bold take on the tradition with weighty political inferences.

Sersawi has also greatly contributed to art education in Gaza. Using a YMCA facility equipped with the workings of a university-level classroom, he taught dozens of artists, many of who are now actively taking the reigns of the cultural scene. Today this new generation continues the movement formed by these visionaries. Unlike the Western model, in which commercial venues and public





Faye Sersawi, "Two Men" (2001). (Collection of Souha Xochtil Shayota, New York)

and private institutions shape artistic output or at least determine what is shown, the Palestinian art scene, which transcends Israeli checkpoints, Israel's wall in the West Bank and the continuous annexation of land, has relied on a dynamic community-based system of nonprofit galleries and art spaces that remains in line with the everyday political realities of its surroundings.

Artist organizations play an important role in providing a much-needed environment for creation and the furthering of art through public events and education. Two leading Gaza organizations comprised of young and emerging artists are Eltiqa Group and Windows From Gaza. Boasting a variety of artists working in photography, sculpture, new media and painting, these groups regularly produce exhibitions and workshops open to the public.

Among its eleven members, Eltiqa Group includes painters Rima al-Muzayen and Mohamed Dabous. Al-Muzayen's colorful compositions explore the experiences of Palestinian women. Dabous teaches visual arts at Gaza's al-Aqsa University and creates striking abstract ink and pastel works on paper. In 2008, Eltiqa hosted a number of noteworthy events for its members including the solo exhibitions of al-Muzayen and Dina Matar at the French Cultural

Centre and a group show of Palestinian art featuring Abdel Nasser Amer, at the Rashad Shawwa Cultural Center. Outside of Gaza, Eltiqa was part of an impressive lineup of events such as *Without Preparing – From Gaza*, a joint exhibition with artists from Windows From Gaza at Makkan House gallery in Amman, Jordan and *Morceaux Choisis Gaza*, a group show at the Universite Paul Sabatier in Toulouse, France.

A number of Windows From Gaza members concurrently work in video, installation, photography and painting such as Basel al-Maqousy, an art instructor at the Jabalia Rehabilitation Centre who was recently featured in the AM Qattan Foundation's inaugural London exhibition *Occupied Spaces* (<https://electronicintifada.net/v2/article9965.shtml>), and Shareef Sarhan, whose art comments on the destruction of Palestine under the Israeli occupation. Sarhan has been photographing the damage, turmoil and civilian toll of Israel's current assault on Gaza.

The impact of Israel's latest act of barbarity on Gaza's cultural infrastructure has yet to be fully assessed. Reports have circulated that the Rashad Shawwa Cultural Centre has been bombed and the Institute for Palestine Studies has confirmed the destruction of the newly founded Gaza Music School, which taught children aged seven to 11, the majority of whom were girls. Located in a building owned by the Palestine Red Crescent Society, the Music School was hit in the first wave of shelling on 27 December. The fate of such important venues as the French Cultural Centre, the Municipality of Gaza's Arts and Crafts Village, al-Karam Center for Cultural Arts or the YMCA in Gaza City is unknown. Even if these centers were to sustain little or no structural damage, their futures are still uncertain as the cultural workers whose dedication they depend on are sure to be facing dire circumstances.

*Maymanah Farhat specializes in modern and contemporary Arab art. Her collected writings can be viewed online at <http://maymanahfarhat.wordpress.com>.*

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